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Fate: Lost Einherjar

— Aslaug of the Aurora —

The Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War

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Berserker

True Name: Ragnar Lodbrok.
Viking warrior and destined Einherjar.
While he has been assigned the class of Berserker
in the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War,
his Madness Enhancement rank is rather low.
He lacks knowledge of the 21st century.

Archer

True Name: Aslaug. The last Valkyrie.
Daughter of Sigurd the Dragonslayer
and Brynhildr the Valkyrie.
In her manifestation in the Doubles
Subspecies Holy Grail War, she does
not remember her partner Ragnar and
asserts that she doesn't know him.





Lancer

True Name: Percival. A legendary knight.
Second seat of the Round Table, a gathering of knights under the illustrious King Arthur. Wielder of Longinus, another Holy Lance separate from King Arthur's Rhongomyniad.



Lemina Eltfromm

A young mage seeking to prove herself in the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War. The Master leading Archer and Berserker's faction. As she hails from a lineage tied to the old Yggdmillenia clan that was dismantled after the Great Holy Grail War, she holds deep respect for the founder Darnic.



Bragi

A 9th-century Scandinavian figure and wandering skáld. It is said that his name is derived from Bragi, the skáldic god of poetry and son of the Allfather Odin. An old friend of Ragnar, who informed him about the rumours of Aslaug (Kráka).



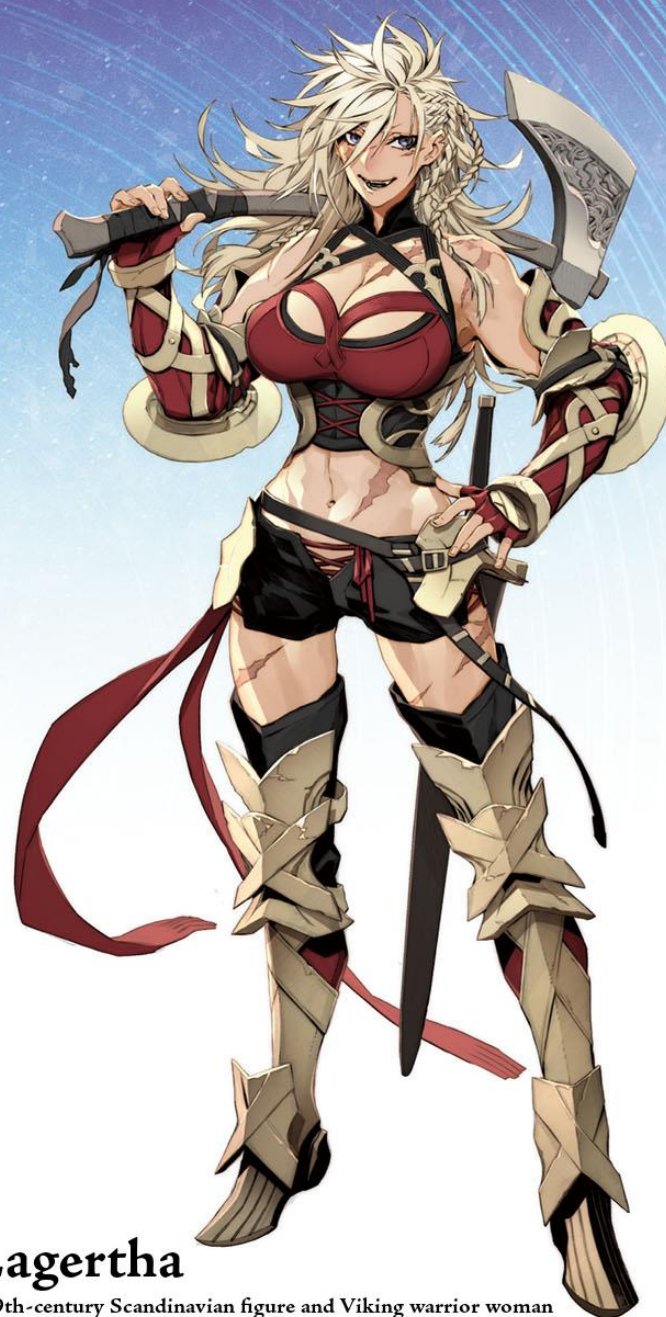
The Istorre Siblings

A pair of Spanish mages participating in the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War. The elder brother, Gagam, is the Master leading Lancer and Rider's faction. The younger sister, Memel, acts as support. They are not biological siblings but relatives that share the same great-grandfather.



Sinfjötli

A figure that appeared in 9th century Scandinavia. The half-brother of Aslaug's father Sigurd, he had already perished once in the Age of Gods. Receiving a rune from the Allfather Odin, he possessed a wolf's body, currently making him a type of wraith.



Lagertha

A 9th-century Scandinavian figure and Viking warrior woman who was Ragnar's first wife, also known as a skjaldmær or shield-maiden. While pragmatic in nature, her understanding and appreciation of ancient arcana surpasses Ragnar.

Fate: Lost Embers

— Aslang of the Aurora —



The Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War

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Fate: Lost Einherjar

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The Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War



TYPE-MOON BOOKS

サB-01

An offering to the dragon and the flames.

When... did I become like this?

I haven't done anything.

I have achieved nothing of my own since I was born into this world.

And yet, everything was bestowed upon me.

This, that, everything.

Ah, all of it was thrust upon me.

But why?

No wish for them ever crossed my lips.

Is it Mother's fault?

Father's?

Grandmother's or Grandfather's?

Or, oh Allfather in Heaven... is it yours?

In my final moments,

I see the glint of cold steel, aimed for my life, and understand:

the evil is I.

And thus, the flames flicker and die.

A greater magecraft ritual that unfolds around the Holy Grail, an omnipotent wish granter. Seven pairs of Masters and Servants engage in a battle to the death until the last pair remains—that is the Holy Grail War.

The Holy Grail War found its origin in the Far East. In the Japanese city of Fuyuki, centred around the Greater Grail in Mt. Enzou, three official Holy Grail Wars took place.

However, after the conclusion of the third, the Greater Grail was stolen by the mage Darnic Yggdmillenia and taken to Nazi Germany, where its whereabouts remained unknown for decades. The Greater Grail was lost, but during its theft, the mechanism of the Holy Grail War as a magecraft ritual became known to mages all over the world.

As a result, the Subspecies Holy Grail Wars were born. By the twenty-first century, this new ritual had been conducted in various locations. However, the maximum number of Servants that can be summoned is five. The Subspecies Holy Grail, an imitation of the Greater Grail, is far from being an omnipotent wish granter. However...

201X AD, Scandinavia.

Under the approval of the Clock Tower, the headquarters of western magecraft, the Mages' Association, authorised the development and organisation of an entirely new Subspecies War, with the backing of several prominent mages. That is, the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War.

As the name suggests, it's a new Holy Grail created by connecting two Subspecies Grails. A system that allows for the large-scale summoning of eight Heroic Spirits (※) and, as expected, grants wishes that far exceed the scale possible with the resources of a single Subspecies Grail. The stage chosen for the first Doubles Grail War is Oslo, the capital of Norway in Scandinavia.

Below lies an excerpt that contains some of the special rules prepared by the ritual's organisers:

First, Masters must not be killed. All four Masters are players that remotely control their Servants as pawns. They are not to be targeted by Servants.

Second, the total number of Servants is eight. The summoned Servants are divided into pairs of two per faction, forming ‘duos’ who fight under the remote instructions of their Masters until the final team remains.

[illegible]

That is all.

(※ 1X years ago, a magical coup d'état was carried out by the Yggdmillenia clan against the Clock Tower. The Great Holy Grail War, a magecraft ritual using the hidden Fuyuki Greater Grail, was a large-scale event that involved the summoning of fourteen Heroic Spirits. In comparison to that, I hesitate to refer to the Doubles Grail War as 'large-scale', but it certainly wouldn't be a misnomer to say it can be considered as such within the scope of typical Subspecies Wars. The curtain closed on the Great Holy Grail War with the defeat and dissolution of the Yggdmillenia clan, which should still be fresh in your memories.)

Prologue

Prologue

The track was 220 Volt's *'Walking in Starlight.'* Its powerful notes echoed like the proclamations of Seiðr prophets, cast far into the distance.

The man swayed rhythmically to the Nordic metal beats resonating through his wireless earphones. Standing nearly two metres tall, his guitar case looked diminutive on his broad shoulders. He was a towering, muscular giant with a scar on his forehead, black war paint around his eyes, and short, iron-coloured hair that suited him well.

Oslo, the capital of Norway. Ark Bookstore, near the Parliament House. Despite being indoors, the February chill in Scandinavia still held an average bite of minus five degrees Celsius.

The man wore a leather jacket open over bare skin, his collar wide, proudly displaying his chest. However, he didn't seem cold to anyone. He was so unbothered by it that one might believe no winter would be able to faze him. The man continued to sway, browsing a Nordic travel guide in a corner of the bookstore.

A young child gaped at his massive frame. Holding his mother's hand, who debated adding a cooking magazine to her stack of childcare and mail-order picks, he stared for two, then three seconds. On the fourth, he glanced at a picture book of a boy in a horned iron helmet, and on the fifth, posed a question.

"Mister, are you a Viking?"

"You got it," the man grinned, revealing a set of white teeth that gave off a surprisingly innocent impression.

Noticing her child's voice, the young mother turned around, momentarily awestruck before regaining her composure. "Oh, I'm sorry for my child's behaviour." Looking at the man's arms, thick as her waist, she asked, "Are you an athlete by any chance? Or a metalhead?"

"Haha, the kid said it already," the man boomed, looking down at her with eyes the colour of sunlit fjords. "I'm a Viking."



As he looked around, he saw none that he could call his own kind. His basis wasn't the heavy metal or the war paint tattooed around his eyes. It wasn't his bare skin either; it was his very way of life.

Everyone here is a proper human, the man thought, tilting his head as he walked out of the bookstore onto the less crowded main street. He sensed no power in the people he passed. Men, women, children, young and old, all the same. No power to take, to claim, to devour. The wild instinct to fight, kill and survive regardless of the environment was absent. Not completely gone, perhaps, but far too muted.

Perhaps they were farmers or fishermen, unfamiliar with the ways of war. But even so, an aura of health and well-being permeated the air, exemplified by the child and his mother from earlier, whose gentle openness readily offered smiles to strangers.

Modern Oslo. If this truly was just a city of peaceful farmers and fishermen, then a problem loomed. That's what the man decided.

His thought shifted to certainty as soon as he spotted the police officers at the intersection across the street.

What in the... Their weapons are tiny! They don't look like they have any intention of killing anyone either! What's going on here?

Gentleness was a virtue, and being unguarded was a sign of abundance. But that only applied when there were none of his kind around. In other words...

"Gotta be sharp."

His feet froze. A prickling heat danced across his bare chest.

Ah, a kindred spirit.

Not quite the same, but close enough. He felt the unmistakable thrum of magical energy.

"Keen senses," he muttered, his voice trailing off as he vanished.

One fluid motion, and he was swallowed by the throngs of Oslo, leaving only silence in his wake. The sudden quiet of the alley amplified the music blasting through his earbuds. *Not bad*. This metal really got his blood pumping.

He fought back a grin. Who was it that told him only an amateur licked his lips in front of prey?

The man yanked out his earbuds and shut off his iPod nano.

As he whipped around, his gaze met a blur—a Japanese sedan speeding past the alley, followed swiftly by the creature itself. It was a bizarre sight. A humanoid apparition woven from shadows, its long, flowing hair nearly reaching the ground. The shadowy figure towered over even the iron-haired man's imposing frame, reaching a height of nearly three metres.

It seemed to be wreathed in a whirlwind, some sort of bounded field. The air pressure pressed down on him, but it wasn't nearly enough to faze him.

"Nice breeze," he casually remarked to the unknown opponent.

He had no clue of its identity, a Slavic monstrosity summoned mere moments ago, but he understood its nature. An enemy. The palpable killing intent was all too familiar.

Calmly, the man began his preparations. With a practised flourish, he drew his weapon from the guitar case slung across his shoulder.

It wasn't a gun. Nor was it a sword.

A thick chunk of iron—an axe with a razor-sharp blade—sliced through the Nordic winter air, a single flick of his wrist sending it spinning to point directly toward the shadow monster.

The message was clear: *That's right, I'm going to...*

"Kiiii!"

In response, the apparition let out a grating screech and burst forth. Instead of running on the ground, it scaled the walls, defying gravity. Its terrifying speed, exceeding five hundred kilometres an hour, tore through the alleyway in a random, lethal trajectory, like a weapon of death. Razor-sharp claws scraped against the wall with an ear-splitting screech as it approached. Moving too swift for the human eye to perceive, it could easily shred flesh and bones to pieces.

The whirlwind surrounding it served as a shield, making it impossible to break through.

At least, for a human. But not for him.

As its claws closed in at breakneck speed, the man pierced through the wind's protection and seized its arm with his vice-like grip.

If the apparition had a mouth, it might have gasped, "Huh?"

Instead, it tilted its head deeply and screeched again, "Kiiii?!"

The dark, black shadow cast by the axe raised high above fell over its head.

In the world of mages, hidden from society, it is common knowledge that ancient arcana, beings beyond human comprehension, can only be defeated by even greater arcana. Bearing in mind the scarcity of an encounter such as this, it was evident that this apparition belonged to such a category.

So, could the man's lump of iron, his sharp, heavy axe, even reach it? The sight itself will speak faster than any recitations, writings or extollations could.

Behold, ladies and gentlemen:

The clenched fist gripping the axe handle!

The bulging biceps!

The thick veins straining beneath his skin!

The apparition made no attempt to dodge. After all, what was a mere chunk of iron to it? Its unseen face, made up of countless slender shadows, twisted into a sneer, mocking the foolish human's powerlessness.

"Odin!"

With his mouth agape, the man bellowed the name of an ancient god in a thunderous battle cry. And down came the steel axe.

——— It's been sliced in half!

With a single swing of his mighty axe, the apparition was completely obliterated. As if a mere shadow monster could withstand iron wielded by a mighty warrior who wagered his life with every strike!

"Haa!" The man's roar shattered its auditory system, sending cracks through its already pulverised head. Whatever mission it had been sent here for, the shadowy figure, now neatly split in two, had clearly been met with an unfortunate fate.



Perhaps it had grown arrogant, believing that in modern Scandinavia, where the arcane no longer existed, there would be few who could rival arcane existences such as itself. Those who dared fight without chanting spells could simply be crushed and their brains pulled out.

As it crumbled to pieces, the apparition would come to know who this man was.

The real deal. The genuine article.

A Viking and a Berserker who had journeyed from the past to the present.

The axe he had used to slaughter it, without losing any of its astonishing power and speed, struck the paved road with a resounding thud. The culmination of deadly will and brute force, invoked by uttering the name of an ancient god, instantly heated up the fifteen-centimetre-thick asphalt and left a deep scar on the Oslo alleyway.

The mage who sent the apparition would have to revise their assessment of this man.

The embodiment of a sanguinary era when war and death were showered with arcana by the heavens, a power that was chased out of the world by the footsteps and light of civilization, but still lingered.

A barbarian who overcame every challenge thrown at him with naught but a single axe, fierce, warlike and courageous.

A hero who crossed the sea and conquered the lands.

A warrior who stood tall amongst the strongest of them, his might echoing the bears, kings of the Scandinavian wilds.

His name was Ragnar Lodbrok, a dauntless Viking king told of in Danish legend.

"Frailer than I thought," Ragnar muttered under his breath as he haphazardly wiped the blood from his axe and slipped it back into its guitar case. Zipping it up, he hoisted it over his shoulder.

First, a victory smoke was in order. Ragnar rummaged through his leather jacket pouch and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. He snagged one, flicked his Zippo, and took a long, deep drag, exhaling a plume of smoke into the air.

Smoking outdoors was legal in Norway, and here, it wasn't out of place. The remains of the bisected monstrosity were already dissolving into shadow. As long as he disguised the guitar case, he'd be fine.

"So what happened?"

"Took out some monster. Don't know what it was exactly, but it looked like a forest apparition."

A disembodied voice echoed in his mind, a telepathic message from his boss. Clear and strong, a pleasure to listen to.

"Caster's familiar... You already killed one?"

"Yeah," Ragnar replied.

"Next time, report any encounters immediately."

"Yeah," Ragnar repeated.

He was grateful that his boss wasn't overly sensitive. Her calm and understanding nature was a godsend.

"So, any signs of Archer yet? She should still be around Bjørvika."

"Not yet... but I might have a lead. I'll go check it out, Boss."

"Master."

"Yeah, Master."

Ragnar turned towards the bay. He could feel it. There was definitely one of his kind there.

Without a moment's hesitation, Ragnar kicked off the asphalt, a powerful leap propelling him skyward. He used the wall to gain further height, soaring through the Oslo skyline. A brief landing on a five-story rooftop offered a springboard for another jump, this time landing on an ancient castle overlooking the fjord.

Ragnar didn't realise it, but this was Akershus Fortress. Built in the thirteenth century, it was one of Norway's two largest castles. As the model for the castle in a certain blockbuster 3D cartoon film the previous year, it was now a popular tourist destination.

Therefore, it was not a good idea to land there. He would be bound to attract unwanted attention. He could already imagine the scolding he would get from his boss, or rather Master, for violating their arcane concealment rules.

Not that *she* would care about any of that.

It wasn't a matter of triviality, but simply that such things never crossed her mind. That's just the kind of woman she was. Her graceful demeanour came naturally to her, an agglomeration of aloof beauty. And even now, at this very moment... she stood atop the ancient castle, her hand on her mythrill lance, gaze fixed on Ragnar's.

Her presence was a blend of azure, black, and above all, silver.



Her eyes, deeper than any jewel, sea or sky, were a profound azure. Her black, arcane attire, reminiscent of the starless night sky, was adorned with a headdress that curved gracefully. Her long hair, woven from silver threads that outshone all the world's treasures, flowed freely.

A lone girl, accompanied by a large wolf. A vision of unparalleled beauty, a bundle of arcana beyond mortal reach.

Ragnar expelled a heated sigh, forcing it down as he composed himself. As if handling a fragile object, he approached her gently, with utmost care.

"Found you, Princess."

The silver maiden turned reflexively at his voice, her hair rippling.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Ragnar," he replied.

"...I don't recognise you. If you get in my way, I'll kill you without hesitation."

Her cold gaze pierced him.

Two ravens soared across the distant sky. Neither Ragnar nor the girl, nor anyone else, noticed them yet.

†

201X AD, Norway.

The Subspecies Holy Grail War had begun. Modelled after the Fuyuki Greater Grail that was transported to Europe during World War II, the Subspecies Holy Grail, though incomplete, functioned as a wish granter. Servants, manifestations of the Heroic Spirits etched into human history, were summoned from the Throne to kill each other for their own desires.

The young female mage, chosen as a Master in this first-ever Doubles Grail War with multiple unique regulations, was brimming with confidence. Why? Because fate had granted her two Servants who were household names within the Nordic region. They were none other than the last Valkyrie and the legendary Viking king himself! To top it all off, the two were husband and wife in life.

Could there be such luck? No, it was too good to be true.

This draw in the Subspecies Holy Grail War, where party compatibility was paramount, was surely a guaranteed path to victory. At least, that's what she'd thought at first. The Valkyrie, however, acted as if she had never met Ragnar before. But why?

"...Why?" Lemina Eltfromm muttered under her breath, the question echoing in the dressing room of the Oslo Opera House, designated as the Command Stage for the Masters.

It was, as the name suggested, the home of the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet, and not at all a facility for mages. However, it had been repurposed as a special exception for the Doubles Grail War. The official renovations and earthquake inspections were merely cover stories.

As expected of an opera house dressing room, everything was genuine. What was she going to do with all these mirrors by herself? Still, it was just thirty minutes ago that she had been swept up in the moment, imagining herself as a rockstar and even wondering where the makeup artists were.

Now, however, her face was pale in stark contrast.

Ah, what a waste of such beauty.

Though Lemina still possessed the mental leeway to produce such a thought, she was losing her confidence, sanity, and composure with each passing moment.

Calm down. That's right, take a deep breath and think.

She clung to what sliver of composure was left, but despair gnawed at her internally.

This should've been a guaranteed victory!

Subspecies Grail Wars, she'd heard, rarely yielded heroes from the Age of Gods. Unlike full-fledged Grail Wars where the Greater Grail could forcefully grant phantoms ether bodies, lower-ranked Servants were much more common.

But this time was different! A Doubles Grail War! Here in Oslo, the heart of Norway, she'd summoned not one, but two figures of Norse legend! Fame boost for the win!

Back in her suite at the Hotel Bristol, Lemina had celebrated her perceived triumph in private. Voice-sealing talismans adorned the walls, ceiling, and floor, muffling her shouts of "Victory is mine!" as she hugged and smacked her beloved Moomintroll plush, all while sipping mead.

Norse mythology. One of Europe's two major mythologies, alongside Greco-Roman.

Mages, especially those of the Mages' Association centred around the Clock Tower, recognise it as a system where the Age of Gods concluded around 1000 BC.

More precisely, Germanic Norse mythology.

A saga of tragedy and misery swirling in the midst of raging primal power! A grand mythology, born from the northern lands blanketed in snow, culminating in the destruction of everything!

Germanic mythologies faded into the ripples of human history with the Christianization of its regions and people, with its remnants preserved in Norse mythology, carried by those who migrated north. This was the so-called general explanation, as told in textbooks and academic books.

But the world of magecraft held a different truth, in which Scandinavia was believed to be the centre of Germanic Norse mythology. In the ancient Age of Gods, the Norse gods ruled over roughly half of Europe, with the Allfather Odin at its forefront. This world of nine realms consisted of the divine realm Ásgarðr, the paradise realm Vanaheimr, the spirit realm Álfheimr, the dark realm Niðavellir, the giant realm Jötunheimr, the frozen realm Niflheimr, the fiery realm Múspellsheimr, the underworld Helheim and the base realm Miðgarðr. The world tree Yggdrasil's giant branches stretched across the sky, a rainbow bridge connecting Miðgarðr, the land where the people lived, to Ásgarðr, the heavens. It was an arcane world overflowing with wonder and fantasy.

The Archer Lemina Eltfromm summoned was the last Valkyrie, who had inherited that legacy. The daughter of the strongest Dragonslayer and the eldest of the Valkyrie sisters. According to the Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok, a sequel to the

Völsunga Saga, chronicling the exploits of Sigurd and the Völsung clan, the girl was an anomaly said to exist in the ninth century, far removed from the Age of the Gods.

Lemina, aligning with the Clock Tower's prevailing theory, believed Sigurd and Brynhildr were likely beings of the Age of Gods.

How then, had this silver-haired maiden transcended time?

It was a big question, but answers could wait.

The Battle Stage would soon come to an end, allowing her to ask directly during the first intermission. Whether the girl would answer depended on her, but perhaps a simple identity confirmation could solve a question that had plagued the bigwigs of the magecraft world for ages. In that sense, Lemina found the great Heroic Spirit summoning ritual both blasphemous and convenient.

The girl's partner, a living testament to the Age of Gods, was the Berserker she summoned. Ragnar, a legendary Viking king, could be considered the last Einherjar of the Age of Gods.

Sigurd and Brynhildr, Norse mythology's strongest couple, and their Germanic counterparts Siegfried and Kriemhild, shared roots and were individually great heroes, but both their relationships were fraught. The girl and Ragnar, however, had no such discord recorded in the sagas. Episodes even suggested a deep bond. So this meant...

"The Doubles Grail War is as good as won. Maybe we can just overpower everyone else?" Lemina muttered softly in front of the Theatercaféen restaurant. Overcome with joy, she stomped repeatedly on the cobblestones, unconcerned about damaging her favourite Jimmy Choo boots.

But what does this all mean? What's going on with my Servants?

"Calm down, Lemina. You have to calm down," she mumbled, staring at the three Command Seals on her right hand. "It'll be all right. Didn't you say so in your letter to Caules? You even bragged to your uncles you'd show them your good side. Yes, that's right. You did. And there's no way you're going to take back a single word you said."



This hardship was nothing. After the Yggdmillenia's defeat in the Great Holy Grail War at Trifas, Eastern Europe, the clan was dismantled, having been severed from its dead trunk. Ten years of clinging desperately to life followed. This challenge paled in comparison.

"If I whine and cower here, I'd be too ashamed to meet Caules or Gordolf!"

With unwavering willpower in her heart, Lemina Eltfromm Yggdmillenia raised her face. The flames that burned in her eyes and soul were molten gold. The embers of the Millennium Golden Tree, although smouldering, refused to be extinguished in this new age. The legend, a saga that began with the founder Darnic's theft of the Greater Grail and culminated in the bitter ashes of the Great Holy Grail War, remained an unconscious source of pride that continued to flicker within her, even after a decade had passed.

†

[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Upstream / Recreating Observation / Ninth Century]

The Valkyries who danced in the skies,
The Dverggar who forged weapons for the gods,
And the very gods and giants themselves vanished.
The battles between dragons and heroes became mere legends of a distant past.
The eternal flame that flickered atop Mt. Hindarfjall was extinguished, and the once-nine realms of the Nordic world were reduced to the single land of Miðgarðr. The World Tree Yggdrasil, once so vast it seemed to cover the heavens, was no more.
The Age of Gods had ended, and the Age of Man had begun.
Human warriors crossed the seas, seeking to plunder and raid...

{Hey, come on, old man. What's the matter? I rewound too far? All right, I get it. It's true that these are all completed events, after all. I'll align the melody with the princess. Quiet. Precision is key here.}

†

The girl burned with fury.

At her feet, the dog whimpered softly. The contrast between its massive size and endearing yips always warmed her heart, but not today.

Incidentally, this 'dog' was a genuine wolf, though she remained oblivious, calling it simply 'dog.' For now, I'll refer to it as a wolf.

Ordinarily, her mood would have shifted by now. Even minor annoyances would melt away when the large wolf, rarely affectionate, would nudge her leg. A hint of a smile would grace her lips, her eyes sparkling with joy. They'd race through the forest or frolic by the water's edge, and her anger would dissipate with time.

But not this time. No, appeasement wouldn't suffice. The girl was simply consumed by fury, threatening to erupt like Mt. Katla 1900 years ago.

The culprit? A stranger who'd dared to pick a fight with her.

The girl was raised with an unshakable belief in her own pride.

Though she had never met her parents, her foster father, Old Man Heimir, spun tales of her legendary dragon-slaying father imbued with draconic power, and her mother, the eldest Valkyrie sister and daughter of the Allfather. This made her, according to him, the offspring of dragons, humans, and gods.

She saw no reason to doubt him.

The headdress wrapped around her silver hair was, he claimed, mythril—a gift from her mother shortly after birth. Coupled with various other possessions and physical traits that distinguished her from her peers, she had no reason to doubt his fantastical stories.

She even believed his claim that she was a being born in the Age of Gods, hidden within the mythril harp he carried. Transcending the Age of Gods and the

dawn of Christianity, she supposedly awoke in the harsh reality of ninth-century Norway, 1900 years later. Accepting this as reality, she believed she had travelled through time.

"In truth, you were slumbering deeply for a long time, thanks to the harp's magical energy."

"Then I must be the world's biggest sleepyhead!" she'd declared.

"Perhaps you are, my dear child," he replied with a gentle smile.

This exchange, the seventh from the end of their interactions, remained etched in her memory.

The girl cherished these memories of Old Man Heimir, a kind, gentle, and generous man who had served as her mother's surrogate and was like a grandfather to her.

Sadly, he had passed away, leaving her alone in the world.

The reality of ninth-century Scandinavia, devoid of gods, giants, dragons, the World Tree, or Valkyries, was a far cry from the fantastical tales.

Here, on the harsh Scandinavian Peninsula overlooking a fjord, she found herself as Kráka, an orphaned girl grudgingly taken in by an arrogant innkeeper couple for a fee of gold and silver. Her days were filled with menial chores. Her only solace came from the large wolf she'd befriended in the forest, her only companion in this solitary existence. Content with her simple life, she obeyed the couple's instructions to remain inconspicuous, even dyeing her radiant silver hair a dull shade.

One fateful day, however, she was thrust into an unwanted confrontation in broad daylight. Someone had picked a fight with her.

"A man seeks an audience with you. He's a real Viking warrior," the stranger rasped, an instrument clutched in his hand, two ravens circling behind.

Her memory flickered; *skáld*, Old Man Heimir had called such figures.

It wasn't the gentle-faced *skáld* named Bra, or whatever his name was, who picked the fight, but the warrior who sent him.

"He laid waste during the recent raid, bested his enemies and claimed spoils aplenty."

"Hmm."

She was not interested at all. Whoever he felled and whatever he plundered was of no importance to her. A nap in the warmth, a romp with the great wolf in the woods, the hunt for a delicious meal of fish and meat—those held far greater appeal.

This, so far, could be dismissed as jest. But what followed...

"Ragnar has set terms for your meeting," the man intoned.

"Terms?"

"Aye. Neither clothed nor undressed. Neither fasting nor eating. Neither alone nor in the company of man. A riddle, truly."

"?"

"A most perplexing conundrum indeed," the skáld chimed in, his face grave. "But should you meet these demands, it will be sung as a feat unmatched, immortalised in my verse."

Hmm, I understand. All right! Time to kill this Viking!

I can't be clothed, but I can't be naked either?! The moment she heard those terms, she was filled with an anger that was almost murderous.

Life had been a slow burn—few desires, no grand ambitions. Yet, the daily pinpricks of frustration, each insignificant on its own, had built into a towering inferno. And now, this stranger's ridiculous demand.

Who did he think he was?

The patronising command, "If you can't wear clothes, you must come bare, but that's not permitted either," grated on her.

Viking warrior or not, the idea of stripping bare when told to felt odd. But a thought flickered. Did ninth-century girls blindly obey Viking orders? Should she?

"No," she said firmly after the skáld's exit.

The wolf at her feet whined softly, but her rage remained.

Vikings meant nothing to her. A fire burned in her gut, a deep, primal anger. Did this fury stem from her mother, whom she didn't even know? Or was it merely a coincidence?

I'll absolutely pulverise you. Prepare to cry a river of tears, Viking.

And so, the day of the promise, the moment of truth arrived.

The young girl had no intention of refusing Ragnar's offer. In response to the difficult, no, impossible challenge, she donned a makeshift garment of fishing nets. Chewing on an onion instead of meat, fish or bread, she arrived at the hill overlooking the sea at dawn, her wolf companion by her side. Her hair, restored to its natural colour, revealed her unvarnished appearance.



The Viking loomed as expected.

A single glance confirmed it: a towering figure, dwarfing her with his bulk and muscle. His iron-coloured hair, cut short for battle, spoke of valour. Black markings snaked across his face, whether tattoos or war paint, it was hard to tell. He was younger, more spirited than she'd anticipated, but that was of no concern to her. Regardless of his appearance, he was the one who issued the challenge.

Shame flared—the makeshift outfit, cobbled together from scraps of her best clothes and fishing nets, barely concealed her skin. Denial was futile; she was practically naked.

She thought the flames of fury would have eclipsed the shame, but it hadn't. Embarrassing. This was utterly embarrassing. Even facing her intended victim, being seen like this was mortifying.

"Kráka? You can't be serious... You actually completed all those ridiculous..."

His words were a meaningless drone. His voice, surprisingly steady and carrying further than expected, held no sway over her. Voice, words, throat—everything would be silenced.

In a flash, she leapt high into the air. Unfurling the mythrill lance from its shrunken form, she spun, gaining centrifugal force. A sideways slash, her entire body behind it, met the Viking head-on!

"...!"

He blocked it with ease. Not only that, but his left hand also clamped down on the shaft of the lance. No escape now.

Instinctively, she cloaked herself in magical energy. The fishing net garment transformed into a thin, hardened armour.

As she expected, the man's free right hand reached out to her... but it didn't.

At the same time, the wolf howled. Perhaps sensing danger, the man hesitated, his face etched with uncertainty.

Seizing her chance, she struck his wrist, momentarily breaking his grip, and snatched the lance free.

With a powerful kick to his chest, she launched herself effortlessly into the air. The forces of gravity and attraction, which would later be codified as physical laws, seemed to have no hold over the girl blessed with heavenly might. She soared with breathtaking grace, a feather on the wind, putting ever more distance between herself and the man.

As she readied her mythrill bow, transformed from spear form, she drew back the magical arrow. Then...

"Kráka!"

The false name echoed, and she froze, her hand poised to release the arrow.

What... Why am I hesitating?

Words from a man who will soon be a corpse hold no meaning.

"Forgive me! I was wrong!" the man bellowed.

Indeed, wrong he was. That much was obvious. But his words were far too late.

"You see, I heard from a rascal friend of mine, Bragi, about this incredibly beautiful princess... and I couldn't resist the urge to test her. Beauty is self-evident, but wit and courage can only be proven through trial. So, I burdened you with these impossible conditions. I was wrong. There was no need to test you. You are clearly both intelligent and brave."

"..."

What was this man babbling about? Was he... complimenting her?

She didn't particularly dislike it, but it was rather odd to be praised by the man who had just forced her to be naked, or rather, who had forbidden her from wearing clothes as well. Still, being called beautiful, intelligent, and courageous wasn't unpleasant. Not good, but not bad either.

"And you can fly," he added.

"...Yes."

"Never seen a woman fly before," he grinned, the smile bright and childlike.

Maybe he hadn't meant any harm by the challenge. That's what his smile, radiating the warmth of the sun, seemed to say.

The arrow of magical energy on her bow trembled ever so slightly. The murderous intent, once a raging fire, had started to fade.

Then, with a mighty roar that vibrated her very eardrums, the man declared:

"I desire you, Kráka! I, Ragnar Lodbrok—the future Viking King—will claim you as my wife!

"I'm not Kráka!" she instinctively retorted.

She couldn't understand what she was saying. *Viking king? Wife?* Confusion clouded her mind. *What to say, what to do?*

She cried out, "That's not my name!"

The embers of fading anger, the bubbling, uncontrollable curiosity, the premonition of a drastic change to her monotonous life spent within the forest and the confines of an inn—all swirled like flames in her chest.

Unaware of it herself, the girl's azure eyes blazed with an intense light, stealing the man's breath away. A sight that convinced him that she was his destiny. Oblivious, the girl continued her shout, addressing the future king of legends. Bathed in the golden light of the rising sun, she declared proudly,

"My name is Aslaug! Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and Brynhildr the Valkyrie!"



"My name is Aslaug!
Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and Brynhildr the Valkyrie!"

Chapter 1: The Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War

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[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Returned / Resuming Observation / Twenty-First Century]

[Norway / Oslo / Bjørvika]

Twilight had surrendered the streets to the dominion of cars. Their iron bellies rumbled past, drowning out the calls of men and the whinnies of horses. So, this was the sound of the world a thousand years hence...

Ragnar Lodbrok, striding through Oslo's streets, offered a curt nod to himself. No thrill, no shock, just a stoic acceptance of reality. After all, with his most revered princess by his side, the rest of the world paled in comparison.

A cascade of silver hair caught his eye as he glanced right.

Like him, who had been assigned to the Berserker class, Aslaug was bound to an Archer Saint Graph. They were both Servants, he'd been told, magical beings that had crossed time and arrived in the present world.

"Servant," he murmured, the word lost in the engine's roar.

A red traffic light, two stark eyes stacked vertically, brought Ragnar to a halt. The girl stopped beside him.

Standing in front of the crosswalk were a two-metre-tall giant and a slightly petite girl. The man with a guitar case slung over his shoulder and a leather jacket hugging his broad back—a metalhead, perhaps? And the girl, defying the Nordic winter in a single, gleaming black dress—a student?

No. Far from it.

These two figures, maintaining a subtle distance, were the very stuff of sagas: Ragnar Lodbrok, Viking king, and Aslaug, his queen. The last Einherjar and Valkyrie.

"Ah."

The double red lights winked out, replaced by a singular green.

Ragnar resumed his stride, blending with the flow of the city. He did not relax his guard. This was a patrol, not a rendezvous. The harbour, awash in twilight's embrace, wasn't a date spot but a battlefield waiting to erupt.

The silver maiden lingered a step behind. Ragnar, in silent acknowledgement, slowed his pace to match hers.

Her eyes sparkled with the fuel of curiosity, her azure gaze flitting across the dazzling displays lining the boutiques. Delicate brows danced a constant question on her face, a reflection of her astonishment at the modern world unfolding around her.

I see. She must have been experiencing Oslo with this same wide-eyed wonder for the past few hours.

As a loyal Servant, her behaviour wasn't exactly exemplary.

Understandable, though, Ragnar thought to himself, taking a drag from his cigarette.

To them, visitors from a bygone era, the cityscape was quite the novelty. It wasn't just the absence of their own kind or the pervasive peace that captivated them. Modern architecture constructed from materials unknown, streets paved neither with cobblestone nor dirt, garments seemingly woven from something other than fur or thread, horseless carriages that propelled themselves, traffic signals that glowed without flame, and mobile phones that allowed for conversations across vast distances. Even the iPod nano.

Everything was strange, bizarre, and yet... oddly familiar.

For Ragnar, despite the overwhelming strangeness, an unshakable feeling persisted. As long as this was the Nordic land overlooking the fjords, it wasn't so different. The same cold air filled his lungs. A sense of familiarity that transcended mere feeling. He felt it for the silver maiden beside him too...

"..."

...and stole a silent glance at her profile.

She embodied the very essence of beauty from the Age of Gods, her silver hair and azure eyes sparkling in the fading light. Even the relentless march of time seemed powerless against this girl, a descendant of gods, men, and dragons.

Undoubtedly, she'd attract attention. Ragnar, at least, held that certainty.

Yet, the silver maiden... blended seamlessly into the modern sprawl of Oslo. Merely a pretty young woman—that was the extent of the recognition she garnered.

Is it even possible for someone to not be captivated by my princess?

Some form of arcana must be at play here.

He was ninety percent certain that some form of perception interference had to be in effect. There was just no way. Was it a passive ability granted by her status as a Servant? Or maybe, a thousand years later, did the Valkyrie maiden simply appear so natural to Scandinavian eyes that she went unnoticed in this modern world? Or perhaps... a divine protection.

"Your doing, Odin?" he muttered into the air.

Silence. This was a question for the experts.

Some arcane effect was undoubtedly shielding the silver maiden from unwanted attention.

However, there were a few exceptions.

For humans, it was babies nestled in their parents' arms. Adults were susceptible—the first to fall prey to the spell. Then there were animals, particularly those with keen senses, like pet dogs on walks. Ragnar had observed that beings closer to nature seemed more likely to notice her.

Wow, that was a shock. Why did a princess who shouldn't even be here appear out of nowhere?

Indeed, that's what they would silently question as they gazed upon her.

"I might just be imagining things, but am I being watched?"

"Just by some of the babies and dogs."

"Huh?"

"I don't know how it works. I'll ask the boss later, so just bear with it for now."

"All right," she conceded with a nod.

Her patience, however, only extended so far. One baby and two dogs later, it had faded completely. The second baby, unfortunate enough to catch her eye, spurred her into action. Leaning in close—a mere three centimetres—she peered intently into its bright blue eyes with her own.

"Hey, cut it out."

Ragnar reacted swiftly, his bulky arm intercepting her finger before it could reach the baby's cheeks. He scooped her up by the waist and repositioned her to a safe distance from the bewildered child and its oblivious father.

"Don't get in the way," the silver maiden pouted.

"You were getting too close," he countered. "That was someone else's child."

"Perhaps..." she conceded, her curiosity fading.

Eighty percent of her focus shifted to surveying their surroundings.

Aslaug, oh noble one. Pure as a babe. I will definitely...

"Stay closer to the curb, Princess. And watch out for those iron vehicles."

"They're called automobiles. Didn't you know that, Berserker?"

Ragnar chuckled. "Heh."

Berserker.

Indeed, the girl didn't utter his True Name. She didn't know it. Ragnar held knowledge of her past life, her true identity, but not the other way around. The silver maiden didn't recognize the Viking king who had been her lover, seeing him only as Berserker, a nameless Heroic Spirit.

Revealing her True Name in the Holy Grail War would be a death sentence, so she would never utter it. Thus, he referred to her in the same manner.

"Archer."

"What?" Her azure eyes looked at him.

"Nothing," he waved it off. "Just that 'automobile' sounds a little strange, that's all."

Their conversation was followed by a long silence. The two-metre-tall giant with a guitar case and the silver maiden walked quietly, with nary a single word

uttered between them. The stillness was stifling, even for a patrol. Only a handful of cars disturbed the park lining the back of Oslo's grandest avenue.

Without missing a beat, Ragnar dug his iPod nano from his leather jacket and cranked it up. The wireless earbuds jammed a powerful melody into his skull. The number that dyed the Bjørvika sunset was Hanoi Rocks' *'Tragedy.'* A contrast to his usual metal, but there was an undeniable appeal to North American rock. The music ignited him, tales of heroism echoing in his veins.

He swayed his massive frame, a walking shield for his princess against the chilly sea breeze. Returning the unlit Lucky Strike to its pack, he continued walking on.

"Can you hear me, Berserker?"

A strong telepathic voice sliced through the Hanoi Rocks. It was the boss. Was it the quality of telepathy or sheer will that let it pierce the music's assault?

"What's the situation?"

"We've joined forces. Patrolling together, at the park behind Karl Johans Gate."

"Okay."

A collected tone. The boss, for all her youth, had guts. No emotion could be felt in her voice. Ragnar knew little of the Holy Grail War, but even before this, he understood the precariousness of his Master, the mage Lemina Eltfromm's situation.

The silver maiden, her initial summon, was initially quiet. But upon his successful manifestation, she capitalised on Lemina's exhaustion from the double summoning, and took independent action. First, a hasty escape from the Oslo Opera House. She wandered the city, the Battle Stage of this Doubles Grail War. In this volatile arena, Heroic Spirit clashes impending, remaining unmaterialized was akin to suicide.

Lemina must have been on edge the entire time, fearing the immediate demise of one of her Servants. Yet, her voice, issuing orders to the newly summoned Viking warrior, remained flat, devoid of emotion.

Secure Archer, she'd commanded.

The warrior wasted no time. Stealing a leather jacket and an iPod nano in the first hour, he explored the cityscape. Lemina chastised his civilian interference, but his quest continued. Two hours later, he achieved his goal at Akershus Fortress as dusk fell.

Though a sliver of relief in Lemina's telepathic message wouldn't be unexpected, her unwavering tone remained impressive.

"Archer, respond to my telepathic messages properly. You should at least say something. Even just an expression of your acknowledgment will do."

"Come on, now," urged Ragnar.

"Understood," the girl nodded curtly.

A straightforward response indeed. She didn't raise any questions about the Master-Servant dynamic. Likely, she didn't grasp the mechanics of telepathy and merely acted independently without responding. The way she wandered around materialised, driven by curiosity... that was probably just her nature. Ragnar was certain. She remained unchanged, inherently despising anything that restricted her.

"Archer, did you greet Berserker properly?"

"Greet...?" The girl met his gaze with a serious expression.

"A bit blunt, but I suppose she did," Ragnar conceded.

"What do you mean?"

"If Berserker says so, then I probably did."

The girl nodded again, this time with a firmer conviction.

Hmph. A smug snort escaped her lips.

Ah, every single thing she does is just so adorable...

Ragnar Lodbrok had no choice but to stifle the overwhelming urge to sweep his princess up in a tight embrace. This was harder than any of the three trials they'd faced. Lightheaded, he cranked the volume on his iPod nano to the max. Hanoi Rocks' soul-stirring melodies were all he had left.

"I'd like to confirm this, Archer. Do you know Berserker's True Name?"

"No," she replied, unwavering.

"..."

"I told you," Ragnar said calmly. "The princess claims I'm a stranger."

"I see. All right, understood."

The unspoken words resonated crisply.

Lemina continued to project unwavering determination. She was pushing herself too hard. It wasn't a good trend, considering they hadn't even fought their first battle yet. Ragnar recognised this, but his hands were tied.

The legend of Viking King Ragnar and Queen Aslaug was apparently quite famous in the twenty-first century, so Lemina's inner turmoil must be immense. It was simply unreasonable for her to predict the last Valkyrie from the Age of Gods would have no memory of her partner.

"Berserker," the silver maiden continued, her gaze unwavering.

"Yeah?"

"Princess, queen... Have you been calling me that because I'm descended from King Sigmund?"

"Part of it," Ragnar admitted.

"Is there any other reason?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "You're my princess, and mine alone. We're a pair, you see."

"...A pair?"

A flicker of confusion crossed her eyes, tinged with a hint of displeasure.

Ah, she's conflicted, Ragnar realised.

An insult ought to be punished with death, but were his words truly insulting? It seemed she was struggling to decide.

One second, two... On the third, the silver maiden moved. She abruptly raised her face and...

"You noticed?"

"Yes."

The girl remained motionless, her gaze fixed intently on a distant point. A flawless transition, like an automated combat machine. She was already bristling for battle.

"Boss, they're here. This presence... far outclasses the last."

An undeniable kindred spirit. A shadow with unparalleled strength, cast upon this modern world from legends, myths and history. A monster among monsters, brimming with vast magical energy. A Heroic Spirit manifested in a temporary flesh-and-blood form to walk upon the earth. In other words, a Servant.

"An ambush, then."

"Likely."

"One or two?"

"I'm not sure, but probably one."

"Agreed."

"Encountering them before the intermission is a stroke of luck. Let's play this one by the book. Start by scouting out the extent of their power. Engage with a full-frontal attack. I'll leave the rest to the two of you."

"Appreciated," the warrior replied with a firm nod.

He hefted the guitar case on his shoulder, a silent confirmation of its weight. Beneath his thick chestplate, a ripple of power pulsed through the powerful muscles.

"Berserker, I repeat. If you get in my way..."

"Then end me."

Of course, my princess. What worth is there in a Viking who cannot prove his worth on the battlefield?

†

Oslo City Hall, First Floor Central Lobby.

Upon entering the main entrance, the first thing that caught his eye was a massive mural. Spanning 12.67 metres in height and 24 metres in width, this colossal oil painting, *'Work, Administration, Feast,'* by Henrik Sørensen, was hailed as one of the largest in Europe.

Amidst the throngs of people departing the city hall as closing time approached, a lone young man stood quietly. Hands clasped neatly behind his back, he gazed silently upon the painting with an unreadable expression. Ash-coloured hair framed a cool profile, his mouth a firm line.

Passersby invariably turned to look at him, imprinting his image into their memories.

He exuded honesty and sincerity, with well-proportioned features that echoed the perfection of Renaissance sculptures. A perfectly tailored dark three-piece suit and a black turtleneck adorned his nearly two-metre frame.

His age remained a mystery. While his appearance suggested a youth in his late teens or early twenties, he also carried the composure of a seasoned mentor.

When Ragnar, with his rugged vigour, stood beside him, an unusual synergy emerged.

Casual and formal.

A wild giant and a sincere, tall man.

Warrior and knight.

The young man, without a single glance at Ragnar, continued his silent study of the oil painting.

"Have you been to the second floor yet?" he finally spoke. "I hear they have paintings by Munch."

"Treasure, huh?" Ragnar rumbled.

"Indeed."

"Hmm."

With a low murmur, Ragnar lifted his gaze to the mural. Depicting a multitude of people, it likely celebrated the dignity of everyday life. Art wasn't his forte, but it wasn't unpleasant either.

"Not bad," he conceded.

Meanwhile, the silver maiden remained oblivious to the artwork. Though she'd entered the lobby with him, she showed no interest in the massive mural. Instead, she made a beeline for the wood carvings near the entrance. From this vantage point, she could keep both Ragnar and the young man in sight, her watchful gaze unwavering. It was a bold, battle-ready stance that discarded the possibility of stealth attacks.

"Art enthusiast, are you?"

"I make it a point to appreciate its art when I visit a new city for the first time."

"Quite elegant of you."

"Is it?"

Throughout their conversation, the young man never met Ragnar's eyes. Similarly, Ragnar remained focused on the painting. With a composed nod, he finally asked, "You're a Servant, aren't you?"

Normally, you'd keep that hidden, right? But hey, whatever. No harm in a little chat.

"Indeed," the young man replied. "I am a Heroic Spirit manifested as a Lancer."

He actually answered.

A flicker of surprise crossed Ragnar's brow, a gesture of respect for the young man's boldness and honesty.

The Doubles Grail War—a battle to the death between summoned heroes. He could ask for no better first opponent.

Then, a woman's voice shattered the silence.

"That's far too chivalrous of you."

Bright hair framed her face as she strode into the main hall. Her aura evoked a feline predator. A striking crimson garment adorned her. The belt around her waist likely held a magical talisman. Her sudden appearance suggested the use of sound-cancellation and invisibility techniques, perhaps channelled through a talisman or Mystic Code that bypassed incantation.

There was no way she could have been hiding next to Lancer. Within a few metres, his warrior instincts would've picked up on her presence. She must have been waiting at the hall's edge, or perhaps even outside. A well-orchestrated move.

"Lancer," she chided, "revealing your class so readily to the enemy?"

"Apologies, Lady," the young man offered.

Ragnar sensed no kinship with her. Her magical energy wasn't potent enough to vibrate the air and make his chest pound. Human then, and a mage by her bearing.

"*The Master?*" his own Master inquired telepathically, her tone unruffled.

Unlikely.

"No, it can't be. Masters aren't allowed within the Battle Stage."

She formulated her thoughts while speaking, mirroring the approach of his mischievous skáld friend.

"That woman's an ally, a mage assisting a Master. Speaking of the Doubles Grail War..."

A thought seemed to strike his Master. He waited for her response.

Thus came the answer, courtesy of Lemina Eltfromm: *"The younger sister of the Istorre siblings!"*

Ragnar relayed the information.

While unfamiliar with the name, she was clearly a participant in this Doubles Grail War. A mage, no doubt. The telepathic exchange with his Master hinted at her power—first-rate, perhaps even exceptional.

"Memel Istorre," she declared with a theatrical bow. "No need to bother with introductions."

A mage on the front lines? Not bad.

"Impertinent," his Master commented telepathically.

"I'll relay that too," Ragnar replied.

"Go ahead," his Master concurred.

A hearty laugh escaped him. A spirited Master suited him well.

His lips twitched at the corners. The opponent might be a powerful mage, but they had a warrior and Valkyrie of their own. His Master was no slouch either.

Besides, if she fell for such a blatant provocation...

"You're quite the impertinent one, Memel Istorre," Ragnar relayed.

"So I've been told," she replied with a nonchalant shrug. "A cheap attempt at a jab?"

"Perhaps."

During this exchange, his Master sent another message. An ally accompanying a Servant wasn't against the rules. The reasoning was sound. No grounds for complaint there.

But what was Memel's true purpose? She ought to be well aware of how fierce battles between Servants could be. Why would she expose herself to the public eye? The real reason must be...

"A crowd dispersal technique..."

"...is what the boss is saying."

"Sharp," Memel acknowledged with a slight nod. "Indeed. By dispersing the crowd, I can set the stage for a battle without needing to wait for the dead of night, all the while maintaining the veil of arcana."

"Cameras and such would be dealt with later," his Master continued telepathically. *"Letting management take care of the loose ends is part of the plan. I feel a little bad for them, but this girl seems like my type."*

Ragnar shrugged with a smirk, glancing towards the female mage beside Lancer. Her frail physique, a waist seemingly narrower than his bicep, spoke of vulnerability. She wouldn't withstand a fist, let alone an axe. Yet, her steely gaze betrayed no fear. This, he recognised, was the face of a seasoned warrior, forged in countless battles. No reckless bravery of the naive, but a honed resolve. A formidable woman, no doubt.

"The boss praised you," Ragnar offered.

"Empty words," she retorted. "What value holds the praise of a coward who hides behind anonymity?"

"Haha, well said."

"Hey, Berserker?"

A disgruntled telepathic message came from the boss.

Ragnar flashed a toothy grin. A bit of playful banter between mages was nothing to get worked up about.

"Enough, Memel," the young man interjected calmly. Shaking his head, as if resigned to the inevitable, he added, "A shame to mar such exquisite art. Perhaps we can move this outside?"

"Boss."

"Agreed, I would certainly like to avoid destroying the mural. The Munch on the second floor too."

A silent glance from Ragnar confirmed his Master's approval. The young man turned and headed for the stairs, Memel following close behind.

Ragnar began to follow, whistling a high-pitched tune that echoed through the deserted city hall. The silver maiden, who'd ignored Memel's arrival, her gaze locked on Lancer, finally reacted—a startled frown.

"Don't treat me like a lapdog."

"My bad."

"And the laughter?"

"Laughing, am I?"

He'd aimed for a stoic expression, but clearly failed. The anticipation of the coming battle tugged at his lips, pulling them into a reluctant grin. He tilted his head, a hand instinctively reaching to rub his chin. He needed to compose himself. A warrior, after all, wouldn't lick his lips before his prey.

Oh Allfather, please watch over me.

That humanoid apparition stood no chance against me.

This will be the true opening battle of the Doubles Grail War!

Atop the City Hall.

Overlooking Pipervika Bay, one of Oslo's architectural symbols, the rooftop lay fully exposed despite its height. No eyes watched from below, but the spire reaching even higher made it a clear vantage point. Not exactly unobserved.

The crimson sunset was surrendering to the encroaching night, but the location still seemed hardly ideal for the concealment of arcana. However, Lancer and the mage Memel remained unfazed. The crowd dispersal technique seemed to inspire considerable confidence.

Twenty metres separated the two sides, an unspoken agreement. Ragnar and the silver maiden stood opposite Lancer and Memel Istorre.

"What about her?" the girl whispered to the boss.

"While I abhor wanton killing, if she casts support magecraft that could sway the battle, don't hesitate to eliminate her."

"Understood."

The girl nodded.

Ragnar stood stoic, lips sealed, eyes unwavering on Lancer. A stillness that promised not to miss a single move, a fluidity that could erupt into any attack. In modern terms, a cocked revolver.

"Well, then..."

As Lancer's voice resounded...

...the atmosphere crackled.

Particles of concentrated light solidified around the young man, forming armour faster than the blink of an eye, not even a fraction of a second. Thick metal pauldrons, a flowing white robe, a battle belt, and a knight's lance—all woven from magical energy. The armour perfectly mirrored his demeanour. A knight, undoubtedly, straight out of medieval Christian Europe!



So be it. I shall shatter that metal shell and end you.

Oh, knights! Champions of courage and pride, paragons of fair combat. No mockery or scorn from me. Only my axe, and your demise.

Ragnar identified a fleeting gap in the armour's formation and seized his chance. He launched himself into the Oslo twilight, a warrior dancing a breathtaking arc in the sky. A standing long jump of sorts, he propelled himself skyward, drawing his dull steel axe from the guitar case mid-flight.

Raw power coursed through his massive frame. Every ounce of his being, from the muscles on his back to his biceps and fingertips, pulsed with lethal intent.

Twenty metres vanished beneath him in a heartbeat, the axe poised for a devastating blow, a violent echo of the one that had cleaved the shadow apparition in two! A single, devastating swing—enough to cripple even a Heroic Spirit... if it landed.

The warrior's swing of the axe, however, met a resounding clang against the knight's gleaming spear!

"Well struck."

"Gh!"

A moment later, a shockwave rippled outward. Yet, Lancer and his knightly spear stood firm, as if rooted to the rooftop. Even Memel, a few metres behind the knight, remained unscathed.

Suspended in midair after his full-powered attack, Ragnar met Lancer's unwavering gaze. He took a deep breath as the muscles on his back bulged and strained.

In a breathtaking display, he unleashed a fourteen-blow flurry of his axe, a whirlwind of raw power aimed at Lancer before landing. Sparks of magical energy erupted with each clash of axe and spear. The strikes targeted vital points with deadly precision: the skull, twice to the neck, the chest, the abdomen, twice to arteries in both arms, once to arteries in both legs, and thrice to the neck once more.

But the knightly spear repelled them all, a flawless defence. This knight wasn't just a wall, he was a fortress.

Or not. No, he wasn't. A closer look revealed the knight's position had shifted ever so slightly backward. The sheer force of the fourteen blows had pushed him back. The knight of the lance, though formidable, wasn't impenetrable.

But what a shame. The onslaught didn't last. The warrior's relentless assault was abruptly cut short.

"My turn," Lancer declared with a curt nod.

He swept Ragnar's legs out from under him with the spear's butt before lunging for the head with the tip. A brilliant two-strike manoeuvre, sharp and fluid, his spearwork like a sparkling stream. The deceptively light movement of the massive spear belied its deadly potential. Ragnar barely managed to block it with his axe before rolling away to create distance.

He rose, keeping his centre of gravity low, a dull ache throbbing in his axe-wielding arm. He hadn't felt it during the clash in the air or the subsequent fourteen clashes. Was Lancer's weight, turned to offence, really that oppressive?

There's no leeway to take out the mage. If she has nothing more up her sleeve, there's no need to prioritise her.

A glance confirmed the silver maiden hadn't taken up arms yet.

Good. The knight's lack of aggression towards her wasn't wariness of him. It was likely his chivalrous spirit holding him back. Once the princess was fully clad in magical energy, he would undoubtedly attack her, assuming she had entered the fray. The knight of the great lance, fair yet merciless, was a formidable opponent indeed.

"Quite the show you put on there, all alone."

Ragnar expelled a plume of hot breath. Lancer undoubtedly possessed superior technique and a weapon of exceptional quality. But defeat was not an option. He hadn't unleashed a single ounce of his full power yet.

"You're an unusual Heroic Spirit," Lancer remarked.

"Yeah?"

"Your magical energy lacks stability. It fluctuates wildly. It's rather..." He hesitated, then shook his head. "Perhaps I'm the one holding back," he finally admitted.

The atmosphere crackled again as magical energy coalesced once more. In a blink, a large shield materialised on Lancer's left shoulder. Its imposing form spoke volumes of its defensive capabilities.

"Berserker... status report?"

"He's strong."

"Be specific."

"He was already a force to be reckoned with when wielding only a spear, but he's got a shield now too."

"No way!"

"Huh?"

Ragnar raised an eyebrow at the unexpected reaction. The urgency in Lemina's voice was unmistakable—a mix of shock and fear. She'd been making a conscious effort to keep her feelings in check, but that was enough for her to discard her composure and dignity.

Boss, do you recognise that lance and shield combination?

"Disengage. Retreat immediately! Your opponent is a monster... It's Sir Percival! A Knight of the Round Table wielding the Holy Lance Longinus, a legendary hero from the Arthurian myths! No amount of praise could describe his track record in past Subspecies Holy Grail Wars. He's downright won several of them!"

"A Knight of the Round Table...?"

It couldn't be. The legends of the western isle echoed in the warrior's mind... and caused him to nearly drop his axe, battlefield forgotten. His jaw threatened to slacken in disbelief.

"Is a Holy Lance different from a Mystic one?"

A melodious voice called from twenty metres back, the girl's.

Perfect timing for that question! It cleared the confusion fogging his mind, a welcome jolt.

Ragnar stifled a smile. Of course, to her, a lance was synonymous with a Mystic Lance, the legendary Gungnir wielded by the Norse Allfather. He had to nod in earnest agreement. Valkyries, after all, often wielded replicas as their weapons. It was only natural for her, daughter of Valkyrie Brynhildr, to think that way.

"You can't even tell the difference, you dull Heroic Spirit?!"

Unreasonable and cruel words. Memel's spiteful remark came from a distance behind Lancer.

A thick vein pulsed on the warrior's temple. *Endure it.* Though he felt it an unforgivable offence, his opponent was a mere child. He had to hold back. Giving in to rage now would dishonour him as a warrior. Ragnar gritted his teeth.

Light flashed in that instant. Sharp, azure blasts of magical energy zipped past, grazing Ragnar's shoulder, neck, and head! A powerful area attack—a volley of magically formed arrows. In a single breath, dozens of ranged attacks slammed into Lancer and Memel. The girl, now fully armed, had unleashed a multi-stage supersonic attack—a rapid-fire barrage from her mythril bow.

The City Hall rooftop exploded, sending thick smoke billowing upwards. The attack's effects were not immediately discernible.

"A warning would have been nice."

"That would have alerted the enemy."

"Then how about a prearranged signal? Eye contact, perhaps?"

Ragnar braced his axe again, peering through the smoke for Lancer. He couldn't see the girl behind him, but...

"Do as you please."

A dismissive response, most likely.

Despite that, her eyes scanned tirelessly for their target. And found it. The second volley erupted instantly. Countless azure lights pierced the smoke-filled air with a roar, aimed at the tall figure faintly visible in the distance.

"!"

The girl gasped. Lancer, the tall figure, was revealed.

Unharmed. He stood firm in a tilted stance, his grand shield raised. Unlike the first, area-covering attack, dozens of magical arrows were focused on Lancer

alone. But the result was a complete defence. Not a scratch marred the shining lance, armour, shield, or even his calm expression. The shield had utterly repelled all the attacks! Fear the knight of the Lance, Percival!

"Hm," the knight of the lance acknowledged with a single nod. "She appears to be an Archer. Memel, protecting you while fighting may prove to be a challenge."

"...It is not my intention to be a burden to you."

She too emerged unscathed, without a single scratch. Judging by Lancer's slightly shifted position, he must have shielded her. The female mage displayed signs of a cold sweat, yet her expression remained as cocky as before. She lightly placed a hand on Lancer's shoulder, who had knelt on one knee.

"This was merely an introduction. Next time, your heads are mine!"

Lancer confirmed with a nod.

Then, with a graceful leap of ten metres or so, he... landed on a shadowy ship that had materialised in the sky. Wood-crafted, it bore no resemblance to modern aircrafts. Likely some form of supernatural arcana. But a familiar sight to the Viking warrior.

"!"

"What's that?" The silver maiden tilted her head in curiosity.

"An underworld ship."

Floating in the sky, the several-metre-large object resembled a miniature Viking funeral ship. Its dragon-shaped keel flowed in a smooth, unique curve. Divine iron round shields lined the hull's sides, and dense magical energy crackled in the air, hot enough to sear skin. Could this be an arcane Noble Phantasm from the Age of Gods?

A large figure, likely the oarsman, stood visible aboard the ship. This unique aura, coupled with the arcane ability to navigate the skies—they were undeniably a Heroic Spirit, a Servant. Their head and upper body were shrouded in a thick hood, concealing their identity completely.

The girl raised her mythril bow, but...

"Huh?"

By the time she tensed to draw the string, the ship had vanished. Gone. Lost sight of entirely. The skyfaring vessel had melted into the shadows, its magical energy and aura dissolving without a trace.

"You both all right? What about Lancer and Memel?"

"They retreated. Disappeared."

Ragnar scratched his head, shoving his steel axe back into its guitar case. Knight of the Round Table. Holy Lance. Lancer Percival.

Admitting his own limitations was a bitter pill to swallow, but victory against such an opponent without a scratch was simply impossible. And coupled with that unknown second Servant and their Noble Phantasm entering the fray...

There were no cowards among warriors, but arrogance was a path to defeat and death. Prudence and thought often served as shields and axes, and all wisdom could be considered a blessing bestowed upon humanity by the Allfather.

He exhaled a long plume of white breath. Honestly, he was relieved they'd retreated.

The silver maiden cast a regretful glance skyward.

"Called me dull."

"Pay it no heed. It was an insult uttered in the heat of the battle."

"I know, but that mage seemed awfully hotheaded."

"You're one to talk..."

Oops. Slipped up there. Couldn't help but point it out.

Ragnar recalled their first encounter. It was entirely his fault then, not hers. She didn't remember.

Still, clinging to a sliver of hope, he continued on. "You know, Princess. I think you're the kind of woman who'd kill anyone that tried to mock you, even if they were a Viking warrior."

"Berserker." The girl turned to him sharply.

"Yeah?"

"I only get angry when my pride is at stake."

She approached him, her words laced not with affection, but a shimmering anger.

"If I were the kind of woman who flew off the handle, your skull would be in two pieces by now."

Ah, yes. Yes, that's right. You're a merciful, forgiving woman, a far cry from a skull-splitter.

Swallowing back his thoughts, Ragnar scratched his head again.

"I'm deeply grateful and amazed by your magnanimity, Princess."

"Calling me that again?"

The girl sighed and closed her eyes. A faint magical light then enveloped her. The mythril helmet and armour dissolved into particles of magical energy before reforming into a sleek black dress. Ragnar couldn't help but think it looked like a beautiful flower of azure, black, and silver had blossomed before him.

"When are you going to stop doing that?"

"When my skull's split in two, I guess."

"...Do as you please."

She said nothing further. As they were about to descend from the rooftop, a high-pitched electronic magical noise assaulted their ears. Mixed with that came the telepathic voice of their boss: *"Time's up. The Holy Grail War is on hold for now. Regroup and let's strategize."*

†

[Continuing Observation]

[Compilation Continuum Maintained / Target Shifted / Twenty-First Century]

[Norway / Oslo / Oslo Opera House]

†

"All right, I'll be waiting." The last words were spoken out loud, adding weight to her telepathic message.

A swift reply came back: *"Understood,"* from the Heroic Spirit, Ragnar Lodbrok.

Lemina Eltfromm silently nodded. Things had gone remarkably smoothly. No casualties on their end. More importantly, aside from learning the True Name of one enemy Servant, they'd also surmised that the other one was most likely a Rider.

As far as opening skirmishes went, it was excellent. Not bad at all. A slight sting came with revealing their own Archer, but the intel they'd gathered far outweighed that.

It's okay. For now, I'm holding my own as a Master in this Subspecies Holy Grail War.

Lemina glanced at her phone, ignoring the unread messages from worried parents and teasing friends about her solo trip to Norway. With a sidelong glance at the setting sun, she quickly scanned the official app's news section. No updates from the management, no reports of major victories from other factions.

Good. Good.

"All right."

Nodding decisively, she let out a long sigh, her body slumping onto the sofa. Burying her face in a Finnish-made KAUNISTE cushion with a vibrant fruit pattern, she let out a weary exhale.

"Haaaaaahhhh..."

I'm exhausted. I'm soooo exhausted. How am I supposed to maintain my composure when giving orders to seasoned Heroic Spirits?!

Fiore and Caules must have been unbelievably brave to face a Holy Grail War of such magnitude at such a young age. The pressure, the exhilaration—dealing with legendary warriors, embodiments of arcana, and an entire city transformed into a battlefield. The frustration of battling other top-class mages wielding their own Heroic Spirits as war assets. It was all incredibly overwhelming.

"And our first opponent was Sir Percival! A Knight of the Round Table!" she mumbled into the cushion.

Oh, what bad luck. Or maybe not?

Regardless, it was infuriating to see her carefully constructed facade crack so early. Thankfully, Berserker and Archer were unharmed, and she still had all three

Command Seals. It wasn't the worst outcome, but it was a lot to take in at once. She felt the urge to scream and bolt back to her university dorm.

But even so... she wouldn't. She'd made a commitment and wouldn't back down.

"I'll do it!"

The physical and mental fatigue could be managed. Suggestion, elixirs, breathing exercises, counselling, massages—whatever it took. She had a stockpile of potent Chinese herbs from her Eastern tutor, perfect for bedtime.

Right now, only one concern gnawed at her: Did Ragnar and Aslaug think she was an unreliable Master?

The founder Darnic would never have faltered. But as a Master in this Doubles Grail War, she'd resolved to act befitting a composed leader, even if inexperienced. She had to be. It was time to repair the cracks in her facade that emerged with Sir Percival's appearance. The war had provided a surprisingly favourable battleground. Having secured a spot, she would prove her mettle and hold her own against seasoned veterans. No matter the odds. She would win.

"Yes!"

A surge of renewed determination jolted her upright. Grabbing a wet wipe, she removed the smudged lipstick from the cushion. A quick glance in the mirror and a few deft touches of makeup later, she was ready. Maintaining composure meant not letting Berserker or Archer see her anxieties reflected on her face. A touch of blush for good measure.

"Yep, I'm beautiful. I am."

Her features were something to be proud of. With a silent thank you to her parents, ancestors, and genes, she ran a comb through her slightly messy hair. As she pressed her lips together to check the lipstick one last time, the door creaked open.

A two-metre-tall giant, with a surprisingly small guitar case slung across his back, entered the room, followed by a girl with shimmering silver hair.

Of course, there was no knock. No question of permission, only a grand entrance. Ignoring the locked door and the double-layered locking spell, the giant

turned the knob with a nonchalant expression, a wide, cheerful grin plastered on his face.

"We're back, Boss!"

A towering figure with close-cropped iron hair and a guitar case slung across his back. He bore a resemblance to a Nordic metalhead at first glance, but his thick, axe-forged physique and eyes that held the weight of countless battles—a far cry from anything seen in modern Nordic society—betrayed his true nature. The McIntosh earphones crammed into his ears were likely a souvenir from the hapless young man he'd encountered shortly after his summoning.

One warning was enough. Now, the only concern was the shattered doorknob and the dispelled spell.

"Berserker," Lemina raised an eyebrow, "anything unusual when you opened the door?"

"Nope."

"...Then it's fine."

It would have been cute if he had just said it was a little hard.

Lemina, fortunate enough to have summoned a Berserker with a sliver of reason, couldn't help but sigh. While the oblivious Berserker remained silent, the silver maiden who emerged from behind his waist, her posture betraying a hint of exasperation, stated bluntly, "You broke the door."

"Huh?"

"You didn't realise?"

"Nah, no way. Didn't break nothin', Boss."

"Later. We're strapped for time, so that can wait."

Archer's thoughtful words were a welcome relief. While Lemina couldn't help but want to lecture Berserker on his lack of knowledge regarding modern society—information the Holy Grail should have automatically provided—she knew patience was key. As Lemina herself had mentioned, this intermission—the non-combat period—was limited. To be precise, the Doubles Grail War being held in Oslo was subject to a time limit due to various circumstances.

"Gotcha," the Berserker rumbled, casually reclining his massive frame on the sofa, eliciting a groan from the springs. The silver maiden perched on a single-seater sofa with an air of effortless grace. Tilting her head, she reached for the TV remote control on the side table. As expected of a Viking king and queen. They were truly free souls.

With a click of the remote, the forty-inch TV flickered to life, the Vienna Philharmonic filling the room with the strains of a waltz. It was Johann Strauss II's '*The Beautiful Blue Danube*,' a familiar melody to Lemina.

"Let's assess the situation. We can assume the enemy is aware of our Archer. But on the upside, we've gleaned valuable intel on one enemy faction. The Master is the elder Istorre sibling, a Spanish mage, and their Servants are a Lancer and likely a Rider."

"The enemy doesn't seem too concerned with hiding their identities."

"They certainly have quite the confidence. It makes sense if they're aiming for Rule X—it wouldn't be unreasonable if they have the Holy Lance Longinus."

"The spear was impressive, but that ship was something else," Berserker muttered, his gaze fixed on the TV. His attention wasn't on the Philharmonic's magnificent performance, undoubtedly reliving the earlier scene atop Oslo City Hall.

"Could it be a ferry from the underworld?"

"Being a Nordic Heroic Spirit likely grants him a fame boost here."

The potency of a Heroic Spirit's fantasy and arcana was said to be influenced by the land of their summoning. A well-known figure summoned in a region where they were revered could become a formidable force capable of tipping the scales of the Holy Grail War. This was certainly true for the Viking warrior and his Valkyrie bride currently sprawled on the sofa. But a similarly empowered enemy Heroic Spirit could prove troublesome.

"Any leads?"

"Maybe."

"Huh?"

A cryptic response that lingered in the air.

"I'll tell you later."

Berserker glanced sideways at the silver-haired girl. The gesture hinted at something unspoken.

"Understood. Later it is, then."

Due to Berserker's surprisingly low-ranked Madness Enhancement skill, which allowed for some communication, his straightforward nature meant his hesitations held weight. Thus, Lemina decided not to press the matter for now. If it was something he wasn't comfortable discussing with Aslaug present, she could always inquire later. As long as she had enough time to factor the information into their strategy during the intermission, that was all that mattered.

"Strong?"

"Strong."

A definite answer. This was definitely a troublesome opponent. As if facing a Holy Lance-wielding Knight of the Round Table wasn't enough!

It's all right. Every challenge is an uphill battle. You wouldn't want a pushover, would you, Lemina?

The reflection in the vanity mirror seemed to speak those words, her freshly applied makeup flawless. Since childhood, her imaginary friend had been the reflection staring back at her. Even now, in moments of solitude, a glance into the mirror offered solace or advice. Her own eyes, reflecting a steely resolve, seemed to whisper: *You'd win.*

Lemina chuckled, a touch self-deprecating. Her courage felt like bravado without any real basis, a flickering flame fueled by sheer will.

"Heh. A good boss smiles in the face of adversity."

"It's not like that..."

"So, Percival, right? Tell me, what's his deal?"

"His deal? There's nothing more to it. It's exactly as it sounds. A Knight of the Round Table who served King Arthur of Britain. Wielder of the Holy Lance Longinus, the spear that supposedly pierced the Saviour's side. And Germany's most celebrated Knight of the Round Table!"

"Hm..."

Berserker, his face solemn and serious, stroked his chin.

He might not have the full dossier on every Servant, but a legendary figure like Sir Percival, wielding a weapon as renowned as the Holy Lance, should be familiar to any Heroic Spirit, regardless of era. Yet, he looked completely surprised. He'd definitely reacted to 'Knight of the Round Table' earlier, so genuine ignorance seemed unlikely.

Lemina, ever pragmatic, kept talking. Berserker would speak up if something was off.

"He's got a stellar record in past Subspecies Grail Wars—four wins, to be precise. I'll print a summary later, so make sure you give it a good read. Of course, Servants don't carry memories from past summonings, so he probably won't be used to fighting against other Servants, but..."

This knight was a powerhouse. Simply a formidable foe. But even so...

"Our advantage should still be intact," Lemina insisted.

"You think so?"

"Your fame boost is, quite frankly, Scandinavia's strongest."

Ragnar Lodbrok, the legendary warrior king of Denmark's founding myth. And his queen, Aslaug, who bore him countless children, heroes, and champions scattered across the world.

Lemina glanced at the silver maiden. This inhabitant of legends, an embodiment of arcana, possessed a youthful beauty that defied the image of a hero's mother. Perhaps those with Valkyrie blood were immune to age's cruel touch.

Aslaug, the miraculous daughter of Brynhildr, the eldest of the Valkyries, sometimes said to be the daughter of the Allfather Odin, and Sigurd, the warrior king of the Völsung clan and slayer of the dragon Fafnir. Her mere presence captivated, like a luminous star. Even the way her azure eyes absorbed the glow of the 40-inch LCD screen held a beguiling grace. Ah, but... this girl had never met Ragnar, nor did she recognize his True Name!

Calm down. Breathe.

Even if she's unaware, the fame boost should still be in effect.

Calm down, Lemina. Get a grip.

"Speaking of," Berserker began.

"Hm?" Fighting to stay calm, she touched her temple, and looked at him.

"What is it?"

"I think my princess has a rune inscribed on her."

"What?"

"She draws attention, just like you do. But most people here don't notice her at all. Only babies and dogs seem to pick up on it."

"Did... she have such a skill?"

Servants, Heroic Spirits granted temporary bodies, were essentially lumps of magical energy. It wouldn't be surprising if some technique or skill were in effect, yet Lemina had no recollection of such. Masters were said to have a degree of insight into their Servants' capabilities, but for now, it was impossible to tell at a glance.

The silver maiden, engrossed in the TV and music, displayed no outward sign of such a skill.

Then, a sudden movement. She tore her gaze from the screen and flitted to the window, now barefoot.

When did that happen?

"Something wrong, Archer?"

"Nothing."

The girl ignored her completely, flitting back to the single sofa where she perched. Although her body had returned, her gaze remained fixed on the window.

What is this cute creature?

Lemina fought the urge to smother her in a hug like a beloved pet.

"That interested in the modern world, Princess?"

"Not particularly."

The girl's gaze, however, remained glued to the window.

Ah, so that's it.

While she would've liked to formulate a strategy for the Istorre faction, Lemina didn't want to keep her waiting too long and have her run off again. Heroic Spirits weren't mindless automatons; they possessed human intelligence and desires. Catering to those, within reason, was key. Flexibility was in order.

With a light exhale and a nod, she spoke, "All right. Berserker, grab a shirt. There are a few on the hanger."

"Huh?"

"It's getting late. How about a walk and some dinner?"

The last part was directed at the silver maiden, who remained motionless, hugging her knees and glued to the TV. Her fingers flitted across the remote, settling on the national station.

Curious. What's gotten into her all of a sudden?

"I'm fine. Heroic Spirits don't get hungry."

Oh? Could this girl be... shy around me?

She had run off after her summoning and explored the city. Free-spirited, it seemed, but maybe, just maybe, she was simply shy around her Master, like a little child. A strange place, a stranger... and a shy girl. Perhaps the earlier troubles stemmed from a simple lack of communication. If that was the case, it wasn't too late. They could mend their bond, or rather, build one from the ground up.

Lemina took a step closer to the silver maiden, crouching to meet her eyes. "I know," she said gently. "But wouldn't the delicious smell of food tempt you? Even a little?"

The girl looked up, once, twice. "Maybe..."

"Exactly," Lemina affirmed with a nod. "You're not a machine, after all. You're here, a being with free will. So, wouldn't it be all right to act a little more... human?"

The girl mumbled, a hint of shyness colouring her gaze, "I suppose."

Lemina fought the urge to smile, instead opting for a display of dependable authority, crossing her arms with a slight exaggeration.

"Well, then."

She nodded solemnly.

Steeped in history, Engebret Cafe sat just a ten-minute stroll from Oslo's Opera House, overlooking the bustling Bank Square. Founded in the mid-nineteenth century, it had become a favourite haunt of Lemina, who frequented the place three times in the week leading up to the Doubles Grail war.

Inside, a sense of tranquillity pervaded the elegant space. Norwegian cuisine reigned supreme on the menu, with reindeer dishes especially lauded for their rich flavour. While she'd considered ordering the lamb instead, she was more intrigued by the prospect of seeing what a genuine Viking would have to say about the modern ways of preparing reindeer. The succulent pink meat harmonised beautifully with the rich red wine sauce.

The outcome was evident: the silver maiden, her eyes gleaming with delight, seemed to radiate starlight, thoroughly enjoying her meal. Excellent choice.

"Delicious."

"Yep, yep!" Lemina exclaimed with a smile, taking a sip of her mineral water. Of course, she avoided alcohol, such as wine, during the war.

Berserker was doing well too. While he had grumbled initially about the portion size, after Lemina upped his order to five servings of the main meat dish, a satisfied silence finally descended upon him.

"Hits the spot," he grunted. "This reindeer is cooked to perfection."

"Isn't it?" Lemina agreed, then lowered her voice. "Berserker, please. Utensils."

"Huh?"

"Look at Archer," she pointed subtly. "Using a knife and fork. How elegant. Maybe the Grail grants table manners?"

"No, it doesn't. But I can manage with Primordial Runes."

"Sorry?"

"Knife, right?"

As she hurriedly stopped Berserker from drawing his own knife, which looked like a large machete, they managed to navigate the rest of the meal, dessert included.



On the way back to the venue, they decided to take a slight detour. Officially, it was a scouting mission—they needed to get a lay of the land in Oslo, the upcoming battlefield. Unofficially, a post-meat-coma walk wouldn't hurt. But Lemina assured herself, with unwavering conviction, that this was purely strategic reconnaissance. During the intermission, with minimal risk of surprise encounters, it was the perfect opportunity.

As they walked, Lemina nodded in understanding. The ethereal silver maiden maintained a comfortable distance ahead, blending surprisingly well into the crowd. Passersby were more likely to stare at Berserker, the imposing giant. This confirmed their suspicions—perception interference.

Berserker's earlier report had been correct, and the detour through the crowded area had proven worthwhile.

"Do you think she cast a perception-blocking rune?" Lemina asked.

"No. Doesn't even seem aware of it."

"I see."

A shiver ran down her spine. There was something unsettling about it, something to keep in mind.

"Feels strange," Berserker grumbled. "Walking around without any signs of combat."

"Is that so? You were casually strolling around Bjørvika just earlier."

"That was reconnaissance."

Is that what it was?

Judging by his telepathic communication, he didn't seem to be putting on airs. As they walked north on Kirke Street towards Oslo Central Station, the view opened up dramatically.

Oslo Cathedral, a building of the Church of Norway, a landmark steeped in history and tied to the Norwegian royalty, rose before them. In the square, hundreds of iron roses—a stark memorial to the terrorist attack a few years ago—bloomed in morbid defiance.

The silver maiden stopped, her gaze drawn to the rigid, lifeless flowers.

"A church?" Berserker muttered.

Lemina was struck by a thought. Churches back then were treasure troves, prime targets for plunderers like Viking warriors.

"If that's what you're thinking of, I forbid it."

"Hm?"

"And don't forget about the concealment of arcana. The Holy Grail War is to be kept secret, no matter what. No unnecessary attention, and definitely no looting. It was messy back then, but trust me, it's far worse now."

"No looting?"

"Of course. What's with that look?"

He wore a genuinely bewildered expression. Berserker, his face etched with the memories of countless such encounters, looked down at her.

"Northern Vikings, what drives you to such barbarity?"

"Do you not feel the presence of the one true God? Heretics, the lot of you!"

These were likely echoes of pronouncements he'd heard countless times from the Frankish and British across the sea.

Violence, for him, must have been as natural as breathing. Survival in the frozen, impoverished lands demanded taking what they needed. It was a generational value, an unquestioned necessity that shaped their spirituality—clan honour and blessings of the gods, a means to an end.

So, how could a modern mage bridge this gap? Should she say, "You're a glorious barbarian, worthy of the Berserker Saint Graph!?" A bit much, Lemina thought.

Caules had emphasised mutual understanding as key for the Holy Grail War. Insulting her own Servant wouldn't exactly pave the way to victory, and she certainly wouldn't want to do something that foolish.

Thinking this, she met his gaze.

His fjord-coloured-eyes held an intensity that could disarm even soldiers or knights, causing them to avert their eyes or lose their nerve. It felt like it was more than a mere gaze, a physical threat with a huge blade or blunt instrument.

"You remind me of a skjaldmær," he finally said.

A compliment, perhaps? With no further comment, Lemina chose to interpret it as such.

"Berserker," she began.

"Yeah, Boss?"

"To put it in a way you'll understand, modern Scandinavians have moved on from plundering. They don't need to anymore, and frankly, no one wants that. Okay?"

"...That's how it is?"

Surprise flickered in his eyes, followed by a nod of understanding. Perhaps the abundance of the modern world had finally clicked. His initial hours in the bustling city centre had served an unexpected purpose.

"Vikings giving up plundering... surprising," Berserker muttered, his gaze distant.

What was he looking at? The fjords of the old era, or the plundering expeditions in distant Britain?

"Even with this much wealth, they continue to kill each other. Humans really are..."

Killing each other... Was he referring to the Holy Grail War?

For a moment, she thought so, but then realisation dawned. Briefly, a news report from before they left the room flashed in her mind: a brutal military attack on a rebel force, lives obliterated like snowflakes under a giant's hammer. A clash of arms in the modern world. A few years ago, they were even using aircraft to scorch the earth. *Right, in northern Africa...*

"Libya?"

"That's it."

"...Yes. Even though enough time has passed for the Vikings to abandon plundering, war still persists. In terms of weaponry and casualties, the scale far exceeds your time."

Muttering slightly, Lemina confirmed her suspicion.

There had been a hint earlier that social knowledge might be beyond him. But this was something else entirely. Should she fundamentally assume he lacked modern

common sense? Perhaps it was a penalty for the massive fame boost. It might be a good idea to search records of past Subspecies Holy Grail Wars.

As she contemplated this, the silver maiden, who had been enthralled by the iron roses in the square, started moving. She was slightly ahead, looking around with a mixture of purpose and confusion. It seemed she had a destination in mind.

"Anyway, let's drop this conversation. We should catch up before she wanders off."

"Aye, aye."

Berserker jogged to catch up. Lemina followed swiftly.

The reason for the silver maiden's solo mission was quickly revealed. Waffles. The girl was clearly drawn to a waffle shop across the square. Lemina understood intuitively. It was the smell. The girl seemed entranced by the sweet aroma of toasted wheat wafting from the store. What an appetite, even after a full-course meal with dessert!

Lemina supposed it was because Heroic Spirits, beings with ephemeral physical bodies composed of ether, functioned on magical energy and didn't require sustenance through food. Explained the girl's uninhibited approach to food. *How envious.*

"It smells good."

"You want one?"

"...Yep."

The girl glanced at Lemina.

So cute. No, wait a second. This feeling... could this girl have...

"Hey, Archer. If I recall correctly, I gave you some pocket money right after you were summoned. How much do you have left?"

"None."

"Huh?"

"None."

A concise and powerful answer. The girl, unsurprisingly, looked a little sheepish.

"What did you spend it on?"

"I ate waffles. But I only had the ones with ice cream and chocolate, so there are still flavours I haven't tried."

"...!"

"Hahaha! As expected of my princess, how marvellous!"

A hearty laugh erupted from Berserker. Lemina, however, remained frozen in shock. The Doubles Grail War. As a participant in the greater magecraft ritual unknown to the rest of the world, with Oslo as its battlefield, Servants would naturally need to operate within it. Despite being Heroic Spirits, embodiments of arcana akin to humanoid weapons, they wouldn't know the necessity of currency for things like public transportation or purchasing situational necessities. Therefore, she had given them a decent amount of money, but...

Three thousand Norwegian kroner on waffles?!

Amazing. Utterly, unbelievably amazing.

After a beat of stunned silence, she nodded deeply.

"Heroic Spirits are truly amazing. Yeah, this actually makes perfect sense. Got it. But spending so much at once is a bit too conspicuous, so please refrain from overindulging in the future."

"All right." The girl nodded with a serious expression.

"Okay. Then, I'll treat you to the ones you haven't tried yet."

Waffles were an Oslo specialty. It would be a shame to only experience one flavour after such a feast. They quickly found a waffle shop along Karl Johans Gate and ordered three: fresh-baked batter topped with a decadent combination of blue cheese, strawberry jam, and finally a generous dollop of sour cream. A calorie bomb, for sure.

But for now, Lemina decided, she'd pretend to be a Heroic Spirit herself and embrace the indulgence. She was determined it was the right call as their Master. See, the silver maiden's eyes were already sparkling with delight, stars dancing in their depths. Berserker, with a raised eyebrow, took a tentative bite of the waffle.

"Sweet and tart," he muttered.

"That's the strawberry jam," Lemina explained.

"That so?"

Another bite. It was hard to tell if he liked it or not. Just as Lemina opened her mouth to inquire further...

"Is that really enough for you, brother? Do you want some of mine?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"You sure? It's delicious, you know?"

On a restaurant's outdoor terrace, a couple with mismatched appearances enjoyed waffles. The man's long, lustrous hair contrasted with the woman's brightly dyed locks, making them stand out even amidst Oslo's nighttime scene. The siblings seemed to share an easy camaraderie. Lemina, casually surveying the area, did a double take.

"Huh?"

No way. The Istorres?

Being in the same venue explained their proximity, but indulging in the famous waffles felt a bit touristy for them. As Lemina contemplated this, the siblings noticed her.

The older brother, with his calm demeanour, remained unfazed. However, the younger sister, instantly flushed, bolted upright.

"Yggdmillennia," she snapped, "how unbecoming of you. Do you truly think yourself an ordinary tourist?"

Is this really the time for that? Lemina thought, but held her tongue.

Memel, seemingly aware of this too, felt the blush creep up to her ears, and her shoulders trembled slightly. Perhaps Lemina had pushed it too far.

Just then, the brother spoke, his voice smooth and unruffled.

"Gagam Istare. My younger sister caused you some trouble earlier."

"Ah, brother!"

"Memel."

With just a quiet utterance of her name, Memel obediently returned to her seat.

I see. So, the older brother is in charge, is he? No surprise, considering he's the Master. Could Memel have a brother complex?

Gagam was a man of few words, yet each held a curious weight.

"Thank you for the kind greeting earlier. I'll go all out next time, so be prepared."

"So be it."

And that was that. Without another word, Gagam returned to his waffle, wielding his silverware with practised ease. He displayed no fear or emotion, turning his back on the opposing Master and Servants. Lemina couldn't help but liken him to a cold-blooded reptile.



"Huh," Berserker muttered. "Seems like a capable guy."

"Indeed," Lemina agreed, departing from the terrace with her waffle in hand.

A Knight of the Round Table who wielded the Holy Lance, a Norse hero who captained the underworld's ship... and the mage siblings. All formidable opponents. A worthy challenge for her arrogance, considering she'd drawn the strongest cards in this Nordic Doubles Grail War.

Lemina clenched her free hand. Her perception needed adjustment.

True, both were powerful Norse Heroic Spirits. However, one was a surprisingly naïve Viking king, and the other, a Valkyrie with no memory of her queenly role. And then there was Lemina herself, hardly a top-tier mage.

An advantage wasn't a foregone conclusion. Without fully utilising their top-class Servants, they risked defeat.

Now, Lemina. How will you fight, and how will you win?

Lemina Eltfromm Yggdmillenia, eighteen. A mage who had just inherited her family's magecraft. Publicly, a first-year university student from a middle-class background. She had a promising future, though her wish for the Grail remained unclear. Why would she enter the Doubles Grail War with such uncertainty? Simple. To win. To fight, fight, fight and emerge victorious.

Chapter 2: The Trial of the Forest



Chapter 2: The Trial of the Forest

[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Upstream / Recreating Observation / Ninth Century]

[Norway /]

The avaricious evil dragon Fáfnir,
The serpent Níðhöggr and the stags that devoured the world tree,
And even Vánagandr, who sought the life of the Allfather himself, vanished.
These fearsome creatures became mere legends of a distant past.
The eternal ice of Niflheimr, an unyielding shroud, dissolved into fleeting droplets,
and the once-nine realms of the Nordic world were reduced to the single land of
Miðgarðr. The squirrel Ratatoskr, that once scampered across the worlds, was no
more.
The Age of Gods had ended, and the Age of Man had begun.
Human warriors crossed the seas, seeking to plunder and raid...

{Across a vast expanse of time, there lived a single princess. Raised by an old man
who was once a king, the princess grew up healthy and possessed a beautiful soul. She
was then noticed by a young man destined to become the future Viking king. Upon
receiving a grand proposal, the princess reveals her True Name. And then...}

†

The rising sun bathed the hovering girl in its light, illuminating the mythril spear
clutched in her hand. Her azure eyes sparkled, as if absorbing the surrounding light.

It was an arcane sight. Even the rock formations, natural phenomena with
jagged peaks seeking the heavens, seemed to mimic the petrified spear of the
Allfather.

Bathed in sunlight, the silver maiden seemed to weave a legend around herself, and surely, the young Viking, sprawled on the ground, felt its power too. He was being consumed—by the meaning of the name uttered from her lovely lips, by the remnants of the Age of Gods her very presence conjured.

"..."

Aslaug, the girl, remained perplexed.

Why? she thought, frustration lacing her question. *Why is this man speechless?* She'd revealed her True Name, discarding the charade of a false proposal, and even though she'd intended to slay him, a very, very, very special reason had stayed her arrows. If he truly desired her, shouldn't he be overcome with joy, tears welling in his eyes, and propose anew?

Yes, that's right. The anticipation gnawed at her. A strange exhilaration, akin to the rising sun, pulsed in her chest. She pressed a hand to her heart, feeling its frantic rhythm.

Speak already! Um, what was your name again?!

Despite her impatience, the man remained silent. Seconds stretched into what felt like ten, though only four had truly passed. Finally, he rose, squinting in the light.

"Aslaug," he rumbled, "my esteemed princess, please do not despise me."

He took a position of utmost respect, reserved for clan leaders and royalty. Though unfamiliar with the cultural customs of ninth-century Scandinavia, Aslaug recognized the sincerity in his posture, voice, and very presence. At least, he wasn't lying.

"I have no desire for a relationship of bloodshed. I swear by the Allfather and the Valkyries, on my own pride and life, I will never displease you again. Forgiveness I do not seek, but perhaps a... thawing of your mood, Princess."

He closed his eyes, a gesture that spoke volumes: a silent acceptance of her rejection, even death. It was probably his own way of showing respect.

Aslaug, without a moment's hesitation, spoke.

"Understood," she declared, offering a curt nod.

The man's surprise was evident in his widened eyes.

"Huh?" he uttered, the sight surprisingly disarming—a powerful warrior rendered as flustered as a startled wolf or bear. *Not bad.*

"I understand," she reiterated. "I won't forgive you, but my mood has been restored."

As her words hung in the air, she deactivated her magical energy and descended to the ground.

What a roundabout approach, she mused. First, forceful declarations of desire and marriage, then this sudden shift to placating her mood.

Men, truly, are an enigma. Dogs are a lot easier to understand.

Aslaug turned to see her wolf companion approaching cautiously. It nudged her playfully, sniffing and rubbing its cheek against her ankle.

"Fufu. That tickles!"

The wolf let out a mighty bark, not at her, but a challenge aimed at the man. Unfazed, the Viking maintained his dignified air, the sincerity still radiating from him.

"I'm glad your mood has improved," he finally conceded. "Man, you sure are quick to change gears."

"Is that a bad thing?" she asked.

"On the contrary," he replied, "a virtue even the greatest kings lack."

A compliment? Probably.

Aslaug, rather pleased, puffed out her chest in a small show of pride.

"Heimir said switching moods quickly is a trait I inherited from my father."

"Heimir..."

"Getting angry all the time when things don't go my way is just a waste of energy."

"True enough."

"But whenever it truly counts, you gotta see it through."

The wolf at her feet offered a calm nod, a low howl escaping its throat. He resembled a wise elder, dignified and strong. Unfortunately for the girl, her only point of reference for such a figure was Old Man Heimir.

"He's right about that too. Heimir was a wise one."

"Mhm."

Aslaug, almost as if taking the praise for herself, felt a faint smile tug at her lips.

Suddenly, a loud growl erupted from her stomach. It dawned on her that she'd skipped her chores at the inn to prepare for this moment, fiddling with fishing nets and removing hair dye. Punishment came swiftly in the form of missed meals—both yesterday and the day before that. All she had managed was a single, pilfered onion from the pantry. Aslaug was famished. The realisation sent another rumble through her stomach.

"I'm hungry," she declared.

"I'll feed you as much as you want," Ragnar replied.

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

Perfect. Time to accept his offer.

Aslaug exhaled, the tension and magical energy that had enveloped her dissipating. The thin, hard armour clinging tightly to her body transformed into the source of her humiliation and anger—the answer to the riddle, a garment composed of various fishing nets strewn together. As usual, it offered scant coverage.

For warmth, she decided to simply hug the wolf. Perhaps, though, she could steal some clothes from the man who cast a large shadow with his imposing physique.

Glaring at him with this thought in mind, she was met with a sudden flush on his face and a flustered, "Wait! Wait, wait, wait, hold on! That outfit! The armour was bad enough, but now it's gone... no, that's not it! What are you even wearing? Fishing nets? Something else? What's that outfit supposed to be?!"

Aslaug, genuinely confused, asked, "What's your point?"

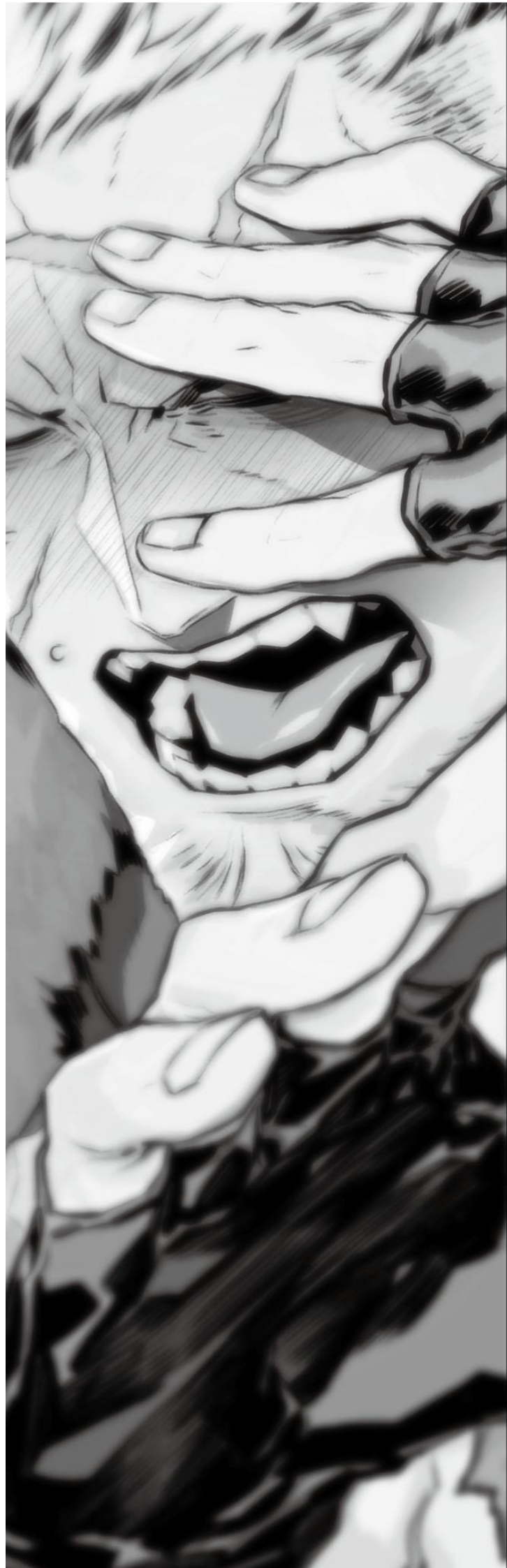
He seemed to be rambling, words tumbling over each other in a frantic rush. Finally, he managed to blurt out, "Look, that outfit. Aren't you embarrassed?"

Embarrassed? Embarrassed, he asks?

What is this man talking about?

This is ridiculous! Of course...

"Of course I'm embarrassed!"



A short while later, Aslaug ventured into the forest, guided by the hulking man. Her skin shimmered with magical energy, a concession to his incessant pleas.

"It's blinding!" he'd whined. "Nothing short of a miracle that I haven't died yet! Please, have mercy! I beg you!"

Exhausted but resigned, she'd woven a garment of magical energy for herself. This time, however, she'd incorporated a touch of mythrill thread from her mother's heirloom harp, adding much-needed coverage to the fishing net base. Warmer than the perforated net, at least.

Still, hunger gnawed at her. Walking for much longer at this pace could prove disastrous. The thick-chested man beside her brimmed with vitality, and adjusting to her speed might not be an option. A horrifying image of collapsing in the forest's heart flashed through her mind.

Just as her stomach growled for the umpteenth time, they arrived. Nestled at the foot of a giant tree near the forest entrance was a small campsite, seemingly belonging to Ragnar.

Viking camp setups were a mystery to Aslaug. She could make out a crackling fire and a simple shelter guarding their belongings. The unmistakable aroma of roast meat hung in the air. Forest game, perhaps?

Only one figure awaited them—a familiar face. His name was Bra... something!

"Ah, welcome back, Ragnar!" the skáld boomed, his arms outstretched in greeting, unfazed by the wolf's growl. "The courtship ceremony was a success, then? Wonderful!"

There appeared to be no other humans around. This must be the campsite of Ragnar and the skáld, Bragi. Perhaps a lack of funds forced them to camp instead of seeking shelter in an inn. Or maybe it was a Viking custom...

A glance at Ragnar revealed him bathed in dappled sunlight, his confident stride as he entered the campsite oddly out of place. Aslaug's vision blurred slightly from hunger. A picture of him, she mused, might actually improve the dwelling's reputation.

"Sorry for the wait, breakfast is ready," Ragnar announced.

Using a large knife, he expertly sliced the meat, checking its doneness. He then placed a thick, freshly roasted rabbit leg on a hard loaf and offered it to her. It was scorching hot.

"Ow, ow!" she yelped.

"I'll also roast some cheese for you, wait there. It's too hard to eat without it," he said.

"That's my cheese, Ragnar," the skáld protested.

"Shut your trap, Bragi. Let me fulfil my promise to the princess," Ragnar retorted.

"If you insist," Bragi conceded with a theatrical bow.

His continental gesture was something Aslaug hadn't seen before.

"Isn't this yours?" she asked Ragnar.

"I've already had mine. My friend is returning soon, so I was preparing a second one," he explained. "And everything I have is yours, my princess," he added, a touch premature considering she hadn't yet given him her answer.

Well, the hot rabbit leg and bread were quite delicious.

Aslaug took a big bite and chewed happily. At her feet, the wolf, panting from the heat, mirrored its master, its tail wagging furiously. Ragnar had certainly tamed it quickly. *What a troublesome dog.*

"Let me introduce myself properly. I'm Bragi, the skáld. Pleased to meet you, Kráka."

"My name isn't Kráka."

"Hm?"

"My princess' name is Aslaug. Don't make that mistake again, Bragi."

"Aslaug..." The skáld nodded deeply. "a name fit for a princess, just like the one from the Age of Gods, when legends spoke of giants, dragons, and deities. You were given a wonderful name, fitting for your beauty."

Aslaug puffed out her chest with a satisfied *hmph* at the compliment, continuing to munch her food all the while.

"Is it good?"

"It's delicious."

"Glad you like it. Eat your fill," Ragnar grinned.

Bragi interjected, "You'd think you were the sole provider, judging by your face! Well, it's all stuff you hunted yesterday, to be fair."

"She's still as breathtaking as ever, even when she's stuffing her face with food. Look, Bragi. Like stars twinkling around her vibrant eyes, wouldn't you agree?"

"The finest princess ever, just as promised."

"Without a doubt. Aslaug embodies the very essence of the gods' lingering radiance."

The skáld tilted his head, a thoughtful frown creasing his brow. "Hmm..."

"Strong, healthy, proud," Ragnar continued. "A woman of unparalleled beauty, with a soul as magnificent as any."

"...Always felt it hypocritical of you, praising Odin's merits yet disbelieving in the gods themselves. Still, your recent words strike a rather odd chord, wouldn't you say?"

"Is that so?"

Just then, a pang of thirst hit Aslaug. As if sensing her need, Ragnar promptly produced a leather flask. A flicker of recognition crossed her face—it was likely his own. However, she decided against mentioning it, not wanting to appear ungrateful for his attentiveness. Taking a swig, the cool water revitalised her. It must have been from a nearby spring.

"Gods and miracles deserve reverence," Ragnar declared. "That's always been my belief."

"Belief? Yet you don't truly believe they exist, do you?" Bragi challenged.

"Well, it's not like I can see them or the Valkyries with my bare eyes," Ragnar countered. "They're more like guiding principles, beacons for the heart."

"That's it! Utterly disrespectful!" the skáld exclaimed.

"Respect I have," Ragnar retorted. "I believe in Odin the Allfather, and a warrior's readiness for Valhalla is a cornerstone of valour. But fretting over whether Ragnarok has already unfolded or is a future prophecy? That holds no interest for me. Gods and legends—mere guideposts, lessons learned."

Aslaug finished her water, then returned the flask to Ragnar.

"If Ragnarok is yet to come, Surtr and Fenrir will rise, won't they?"

"Then I'll cleave them both with my axe," Ragnar declared, a confident smile playing on his lips despite the fierce glint in his eyes.

Aslaug couldn't help but feel he was boasting a tad too much. Yet, that boyish grin seemed to disarm her, putting her at ease. With a mouthful of meat, Aslaug stole a glance at the conversation between the men. Something Ragnar had said piqued her interest. *Whether Ragnarok had already unfolded or not.* That seemed to be the gist of it.

"Look around you, Bragi," Ragnar said, gesturing towards the surrounding forest. "No World Tree Yggdrasil in sight, no giants or monstrous beasts roaming these lands."

"Hmm," the skáld mused. "I had assumed your goal was a warrior's death, to become an Einherjar."

"I *will* die in battle," Ragnar affirmed, "and in spirit, I already embody the essence of a warrior."

"That's... well, I suppose that's one way to put it," Bragi conceded.

"Right?" Ragnar said, seemingly satisfied.

What? Was that the end of the Ragnarok talk?

Having heard some of Old Man Heimir's tales, she had a few words of her own to contribute, but it was already too late to interject. Aslaug, no longer interested, continued to savour her first hot meal in a long while.

"Still, Ragnar," Bragi began, "surely you've encountered a thing or two of the arcane or occult. You did slay that monstrous serpent that swallows people whole, didn't you?"

"And I've seen a princess fly."

"Huh?"

"Just that," Ragnar shrugged. "Perhaps the serpent wasn't a descendant of Níðhöggr, but just such a creature. You shouldn't connect everything to gods and giants."

"That's true, but..."

"Right?"

"But a princess flying in the sky..."

The skáld fixed Ragnar with a serious gaze, completely ignoring Aslaug at this point. His focus was solely on the implications of what Ragnar had just revealed. *What an odd skáld... Or are all skálds like that?*

"Aslaug flew through the air, you say?"

"Indeed."

"...!"

The skáld's expression contorted into a strange mix of surprise, excitement, joy, and sorrow. Aslaug was taken aback by the complex emotions swirling across his face, her gaze darting between him and the snarling wolf.

"If that's true, then how do you explain it? How can a human fly without the power of gods or giants?"

"I saw it with my own eyes."

With that, the man tore his eyes from the skáld and crouched before Aslaug, his fjord-coloured eyes boring into hers. The sudden intimacy startled her. Was this some kind of seduction attempt? It felt more like a wary approach towards a wild animal or child.

"Aslaug, my princess."

"What?"

What was he going to say? Her hand instinctively balled into a fist, prepared for whatever came next.

The iron-haired giant declared:

"Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and Brynhildr the Valkyrie. I stand before you, utterly smitten. Your intelligence, your courage, your beauty—and most astounding of all, your ability to fly – all ignite a fire within me."

A direct confession. This was the moment of truth. Aslaug fought to remain impassive, her mind a whirlwind.

A hasty reply could make her seem desperate.

I've already heard these lines before. How tedious.

"And?"

Huh? I think I misspoke.

"My family and I need you."

"Why?"

No, that's not it. Family? Why did he have to introduce a new topic so abruptly? What am I saying? That was the perfect opportunity to strike him with my mythril hammer!

She forced herself to remain silent, refusing to commit to either side.

Ugh, why did it turn out this way? Why is my stupid heart so noisy?!

"I have a dream."

A dream? What could it be?

"There once lived a great hero named Arthur on a distant western island. I yearn to fight there someday, Aslaug. And with you by my side, I know we can achieve it!"

A western island... the British Isles, harbouring the land of Avalon where Albion slept. A place she'd heard whispers of... from whom? Old Man Heimir? The Holy Sword of the Planet, the Holy Lance of the Ends of the World, the great Knight King, the Thirteen Seats of the Round Table, the Red and White Dragons! These were tales of a bygone era, still spoken of about the distant island beyond the North Sea. A sanctuary for the fading arcana of the surface world, that had dimmed even in Scandinavia.

"With me..."

"Yes! We will fight, conquer, and become legends ourselves!"

His voice resonated with unwavering conviction.

Aslaug instinctively understood. This man desired to carve his name into legend, to leave his mark on human history. The words of a true hero. His hopeful, ambitious eyes sparkled like stars, captivating her azure gaze.

Did the skáld witness the arcane advent from the sky?

In that moment, as the last Valkyrie locked eyes with the future hero, an aurora flickered across the horizon. For a fleeting instant, as if transcending time and

space, the sky of the Age of Gods seemed to usurp their own, mirroring Old Man Heimir's feat with the great harp.

A quiet certainty bloomed within Aslaug.

This was him. This was why she had awakened after 1900 years.

Perhaps. Perhaps this was the answer.

With these thoughts swirling in her mind, Aslaug closed her eyes. The wolf snorted at her feet. And then...

Two ravens cawed overhead as they soared high in the sky.

The forest... trembled, shattering the tranquil morning.

Birds erupted from the forest shadows in a panicked flurry—not just a few, but countless sparrows, hawks, eagles, and even owls, nocturnal creatures that shouldn't be out in broad daylight. As if fleeing a monstrous terror, they fled into the sky, their frantic wings whispering a message of fear.

Dark clouds gathered swiftly, and a thunderous roar echoed across the heavens. Thunder. The aurora borealis had already vanished.

Startled by the commotion, the wolf let out a high-pitched howl, a sound laden with protectiveness towards Aslaug.

Thunder boomed in rapid succession—twice, three times, then a fourth, accompanied by a blinding flash that momentarily painted the world in stark white. Lightning had struck a massive tree at the edge of the campsite.

Only Ragnar's imposing physique, shielding Aslaug completely, prevented her from being blinded. Though the blast felt strangely devoid of light or heat, the sound was deafening, a painful vibration that resonated through her skull, shaking her eardrums.

Amidst the disorientation, a voice echoed, unnatural and otherworldly. A proclamation from a transcendent being.

O Thou who hast forsaken awe. I laud thy valour in seeking to wed my progeny, the demigod who beeth awe unto herself. Thus the hour draweth nigh for thee to learn of the awe of yore and prove thou mayest overcome it. The forest shall be thy first trial.

"Who's there?!"

"I don't know! What is this bizarre feeling? There's a voice echoing inside my head!"

Behold, as a second bolt of lightning lanced down, engulfing the large tree in flames.

Yet, the devastation was short-lived. As if in defiance of the fiery assault, the tree convulsed violently, revealing its true nature. What had appeared to be a gnarled, ancient tree transformed into a creature beyond human comprehension. Two massive legs stomped the ground, and two powerful arms, capable of crushing the forest's life itself, emerged. This was no four-legged-beast—it was a colossal, humanoid figure clad in the verdant hues of the forest.

Although its movements were clumsy, its sheer size was awe-inspiring. Towering above the campsite, it rivalled the longhouse in height and easily surpassed the roof of a typical house. In modern units of measurement, it stood an astonishing eight metres tall. If you were to describe it according to the ancient legends...

"A giant!"

No, not quite. It was a troll, descendent of the fallen giant race, a type of nature spirit.

They had never seen anything like it. The hulking man's profile spoke volumes of his apprehension. The skáld, on the other hand, seemed wide-eyed, his emotions difficult to decipher. Aslaug, however, while unfamiliar with the creature itself, recognized it from Heimir's tales.

"It's a troll," she remarked, "Heimir told me about them. They're kinda cute..."

"Cute?!"

"They're fluffy and cute."

"Well, that's certainly one way of looking at it..."

Ragnar's response was a steely glare as he gripped his iron axe. To Aslaug, unversed in the deadly ways of the Vikings, his expression was murderous.

The troll, however, seemed to sense the hostility, swaying in response. This creature knew human bloodlust and hostility—a clear indication of past conflicts. Whether it had ever truly engaged in combat remained unclear, for with its size, past encounters likely amounted to more of a devastating, one-sided massacre than a proper battle.

The 'bushes' atop the troll's head rustled, revealing a grotesque visage—a gaping maw and bloodshot eyes glowing with an unnatural light.

"Not cute," Aslaug muttered, her previous observation seemingly overturned.

"—————!"

The troll roared, a sound that contradicted its lumbering appearance.

Despite its size, it moved with surprising speed, exceeding eighty kilometres per hour.

Ragnar instinctively assumed a defensive stance. While Aslaug wavered between fight and flight, he charged towards the beast, axe raised. Demonstrating incredible agility, he dodged the monstrous swing of the troll's arm, the force of which cleaved deep into the earth. A second blow followed, this time met with a well-timed jump. Drawing a circle around the towering creature, Ragnar expertly evaded the third and fourth attacks while maintaining his distance.

Oh. This man isn't blinking. Is he observing?

Aslaug's impression was right.

After dodging the fifth blow, Ragnar muttered, "This is it!" before charging straight at the troll. He scaled its massive form, using its leg, knee, and chest as stepping stones before reaching the head. With a ferocious yell, he swung his axe with all his might.

"Ragghhhhhh!"

The muscles in his arms bulged with a crack, their exertion a testament to the raw power unleashed. Steel met flesh in a devastating blow that severed the troll's neck, sending its head flying through the air.

"Strong, but not fast enough!" Ragnar grunted as the head rolled on the forest floor, rapidly desiccating and withering away as if time lapsed.

"Ha! You did it, Ragnar!"

"Yeah!"

The skáld cheered, but Aslaug gave him a cold stare. He was celebrating too soon. According to Old Man Heimir, trolls possessed an astounding regenerative ability. A closer look at the headless torso revealed a horrifying sight—*squelch*, the wound writhed and pulsed with an unnatural energy. It closed with horrifying regenerative power, or rather, an entirely new head began to sprout!

"That won't do it. The wound was too shallow," Aslaug remarked.

"There's no way that was shallow!"

"You have to imbue your axe with magical energy."

"What?"

"...Watch this."

With those short words, Aslaug took flight. She instantly enlarged the mythrill spear she had shrunk to the size of a palm and transformed it into a bow. While the wolf on the ground was attracting attention, she fired a rapidfire volley of magical arrows at the troll's entire body, from its torso to its head. A direct hit!

"Oh, by Thor's barbaric courage! An arrow of azure light out of nowhere!" the skáld exclaimed in awe.

Apparently, he wasn't much of a fighter.

"Like I said, magical energy."

Feeling a flicker of annoyance, Aslaug aimed a powerful magical arrow at the troll's heart. It pierced through! The monster stopped moving abruptly, a gaping hole in its chest. The wolf howled loudly as if congratulating her.

"Great job, Princess! Magical energy sure is amazing!"

"Hmph," Aslaug replied, puffing her chest out with pride at the praise.

It seemed most humans in this era struggled with wielding magical energy.

Lost in thought, she didn't notice it at first—another *squelch*. The gaping hole in the monster's chest was closing up. Its regenerative ability was still active!

"Huh?"

"Hey, hey, hey, regenerating an entire head was ridiculous enough! Now you're telling me it can survive even without a heart?!"

"Kinda interesting," Aslaug admitted, her honest feelings slipping from her lips.

The skáld's face turned ashen. Ragnar, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to hold back a laugh. He finally cracked a smile.

"I kind of get how you feel," he said, "but the situation is bad... Run! Run, with all your might!"

He sprinted away, renewed urgency in his stride. The wolf followed close behind. The skáld had already fled.

Aslaug, still hovering in the air, called out, "Aren't we going to do anything?"

"We need to observe it more closely! Find an opening to kill it while we run!" Ragnar shouted back.

"Find an opening to kill it."

Understood. For now, we'll leave the proposal on hold.

First, let's kill that thing!





The troll's lumbering form seemed ill-suited for extended sprints. Yet, it remained an apparition that transcended nature. After the Age of Gods, the giants—once phantasmal species with a genuine lineage—could no longer sustain themselves. They merged with fading nature spirits, smaller beings also losing their physical form, to survive through the Nordic era of human history. As Old Man Heimir described them, that's the kind of existence they were.

Perhaps a simpler explanation: they simply disliked running for long stretches. Despite their bulky appearance, trolls displayed surprising agility. Their size made their movements appear sluggish compared to humans, but in reality, they were moving at an incredible pace.

Aslaug clamped a hand over her mouth, stifling an exclamation. Beside her, Ragnar and the wolf ran in tandem, seemingly in conversation.

"...It's gone."

"Woof."

Aslaug tilted her head, musing on the unlikely friendship. The wolf was inherently shy, bearing a striking resemblance to someone...

"Seems the troll's sense of smell isn't the keenest," she murmured to herself.

"Indeed," the skáld emerged from his hiding spot.

The wolf, instinctively baring its teeth, issued a warning growl. Unfazed, the girl posed her question.

"Were you able to leave the forest?"

"Twas tricky," he replied. "Remember that earlier lightning strike?"

"Two of them," Ragnar confirmed with a nod.

"Tried venturing out myself," the skáld continued, "but lightning strikes whenever I approach the border."

"I see," Ragnar said grimly.

"I don't know who that voiceless entity was, but if I had to guess..."

...they wouldn't be able to leave the forest until they killed the troll.

A shared understanding settled over the three.

But for Aslaug, escape had never been an option. The fiery determination she'd held towards Ragnar moments ago now blazed towards the troll.

I'll absolutely pulverise it. Anyone who spouts cryptic nonsense and bullies me gets what's coming to them!

"Yep! Let's kill it!"

"Ahaha. You've got quite the Viking spirit for such a delicate lady, princess."

"Fitting for my bride. Now, the question remains: how do we kill it?"

"Trolls... folklore mentions a weakness," the skáld pondered.

"Still alive after decapitation and a shot to the heart," Ragnar pointed out.

"Not that kind of weakness," the skáld clarified. "An inherent one, tied to their origins and nature, told of in folklore. For example, the organs of a specific animal, fire, water..."

"Ah!"

That's right, I remember now!

An unnatural weakness tied to their origin... Aslaug rummaged through her memory, searching for the exact wording. The old man's words echoed in her mind—that particular cadence, unmistakable.

"Sunlight! They're vulnerable to sunlight!"

"Aha! Makes sense!"

The skáld slapped his knee, seemingly satisfied about something. He was lost in a flurry of theories about beings of darkness being weak to sunlight, residing in the modern world's last arcane realm—the night—or perhaps hailing from a realm of darkness itself. Aslaug, however, paid him little mind. Ragnar, grasping the key point, spoke with satisfaction.

"So, the bastard will die when exposed to sunlight."

"Yep."

"Good news, then," he said, "but the weather..."

Ragnar exhaled, gazing skyward. The once-clear expanse was now shrouded in heavy clouds, a consequence of the thunder and the voice.

"Doubt this sky lasts until morning, Ragnar," Bragi remarked.

"You can tell?"

"By the smell."

"Same feeling here," Aslaug concurred.

"All right, I believe you."

"Decisive, aren't we?! Am I the only one who feels the difference in treatment?" the skáld quipped, the playful glint in his eye remaining for only a second before he put on a more serious expression. "This isn't ideal. We can't just sit here and wait for dawn. If the troll's out there sniffing around, it'll find us eventually. Besides, even if we did hold out that long, I'd wager it wouldn't dare venture into the sunlight."

"We need a way to expose it," Ragnar said. "A trap, perhaps?"

"Good idea."

"Agreed," Aslaug confirmed. "Heimir suggested a trap as well."

"Settled then."

Nodding, Ragnar stood up. He kept his shoulders in place while swinging his arms around.

"My furry wolf companion over here and I will keep it occupied on the west side until the break of dawn." He gestured towards the wolf. "Princess and Bragi, set a trap on the east side—back at the campsite."

"Sigh. We have no choice, I suppose."

The wolf let out a disgruntled woof.

What is this man saying? Vikings, forever baffling.

With a curt dismissal, she narrowed her eyebrows and pointed out, "But that's a dog, you know?"

"Haha! You heard that, Bragi? My princess, quite the jokester!"

Despite not intending it as a joke at all, Ragnar spun around, a look of adoration on his face, oblivious to the lack of humour in her statement. The wolf nimbly chased after him.

†

Under the overcast sky, the troll lumbered forward, sniffing the air for prey. There, standing before it, were a proud Viking warrior and a wolf.

"Hey, big fella," Ragnar boomed, "Ever heard of the game 'Fox and Geese'?"

[Continuing Observation]

[Compilation Continuum Maintained / Target Maintained / Ninth Century]

[Norway / Trial of the Forest]

{The 'Fox and Geese' game is quite famous, wouldn't you agree? Other parts of the world call it 'tag,' I believe. Apparently, Vikings in Scandinavia played it as a board game back in the ninth century. You know, I've played it quite a bit myself. What? You haven't heard of it? Really? Oh, well. Let's fast forward a tad. Our brave Ragnar? He duelled the troll in a game of 'Fox and Geese' for over twenty hours. Remarkably, he did so flawlessly, never exposing himself to any real danger. We often come across the term 'machine-like' being thrown around, but I can't think of a better word to describe Ragnar's feat.}

†

Dawn broke over the eastern edge of the forest.

At first glance, the entire tree at the former campsite seemed to have morphed into the troll. But a closer look revealed only a section, roughly thirty percent, currently animated the creature. The rest remained rooted, faithful to its arboreal origin. Perhaps the troll's behaviour mirrored a parasitic plant, the skáld had suggested.

Aslaug, unimpressed, focused on her task: constructing a trap to kill it. The mythrill lyre, that changed into various forms based on her will and magical energy, made quick work of cutting wood. However, working with the frail skáld significantly slowed progress. A full day and night bled into each other as they meticulously built the trap, barely finishing before dawn.

She ascended a ten-metre branch, her vantage point overlooking the now-unrecognisable campsite, devastated by the lightning strikes and troll destruction.

I didn't even get to finish breakfast. This humiliation will be avenged!

Just as the girl quietly made up her mind, a sudden blur erupted from the forest depths. The troll, resembling a famished beast, drooled profusely as it charged on all fours. Ragnar and the wolf, running at breakneck speed, barely stayed ahead of the monstrosity!

"It's faster than before! Have they been running around like this for the entire day?!"

"Here they come!"

Sunlight dappled the ground where shade had dominated just the morning before.

Trap number one: strategically felled branches from surrounding trees, creating a circle of sunlight. Ragnar and the wolf lured the troll towards the illuminated area!

"—————?!"

The troll roared. This time, a scream of pain. Having been exposed to sunlight, it recoiled instinctively, attempting to flee back into the dense forest.

But there awaited trap number two: the skáld yanked on ropes they'd salvaged from the campsite, causing the precariously balanced branches to collapse, creating an even larger sunlit area.

The startled troll bolted towards another patch of shade.

"Sorry, but that won't work either!" the skáld yelled, pulling another rope, triggering a third beam of sunlight. The troll shrieked, its movements frantic as it sought refuge in the remaining shaded areas.

But there... lay trap number three. The grand finale, which Aslaug and the skáld had built while covered in mud!

Take this! Fall into the pit!

"!!"

With a resounding thud, the troll plummeted into the ten-metre pit. Simultaneously, the skáld pulled the final rope, causing the canopy of leaves and branches to cave in.

The monstrous descendant of giants, now fully exposed to the sun, emitted a thunderous roar. Smoke sizzled from its entire body. The sunlight burned.

Yet, it didn't die immediately. The mushrooms and conifers blanketing its form—not only symbolic but also a nature spirit's defence mechanism—allowed it to function briefly under the sun's harsh rays, the skáld hastily explained.

The troll, fueled by pain and primal rage, contorted its body, a massive green arm slowly reaching towards the edge of the pit.

"Ah!" Aslaug gasped.

Could this monster shapeshift?

"Not on my watch!"

Standing at the edge of the pit, Ragnar chopped off its grasping fingers with his axe before the troll could gain purchase. But hope was short-lived; regeneration was instantaneous, far outpacing his attacks.

This is bad. If it escapes from the pit, we're doomed! We only have the wooden spears left!

As if sensing her desperation, or perhaps not, Ragnar declared, "Leave it to me."

With just those few words, the mighty hero leapt into the pit. Landing with a thud, he unleashed a whirlwind of blows in a single breath, severing its right leg. He then did the same to the left, knocking the troll off balance. But like clockwork, it immediately began to regenerate!

"Ragnar! Get out of there! It'll crush you!" the skáld shouted.

"I'm heading down."

Acting faster than she could think, Aslaug snatched the five spears they kept as a last resort and launched herself into the air. Ignoring the wolf's worried whines, she reached the pit's bottom in a heartbeat.

A single glance confirmed Ragnar's survival. The troll, though smouldering under the sunlight's assault, remained alive. A thick curtain of leaves and moss shielded it from the sun's full wrath. It wouldn't burn quickly, and with regeneration kicking in, escape through its outstretched arms seemed imminent.

If it escaped into the forest, they would be helpless.

I can't let that happen. I don't want to be trapped in this forest.

Such thoughts flickered and vanished. Not because she couldn't return to the inn, but because such worries were luxuries she couldn't afford. This was her first true fight for survival, and dwelling on anything else would guarantee a swift demise. Burning the troll here and now was the only solution. Prone on the ground, it was in the perfect posture to be pinned to the hole.

Her spears shot forth—two for each leg, the final one spearing its torso. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

But the troll, anticipating her move, roared, "ILL TA...KE Y...OU!" mimicking human speech with a grotesque parody.

It lunged, its maw impossibly wide, metres from where she lay. Fast. Reactable, but far quicker than anticipated. Her reflexes had failed her. The troll's jaws ripped open, revealing a distorted reflection of human teeth—monstrous steel shields, mortars and pestles glinting in the dim light. A horrifying sight, a caricature of humanity.

It'll take one of my arms... But I can heal that with runes!

Gritting her teeth, she steeled herself. Less than a second had passed since the troll marked her. A flash of high-speed battle. The monstrous eyes darted, its triumphant malice fueling a renewed surge of acceleration. Its maw stretched even wider, surpassing its natural limits. It craved more than just an arm. It wanted everything—flesh, bones, organs, and even brain. Aslaug, oblivious to the ancient Bergrisi giants' bloodlust and hunger coursing through the troll, finally grasped the gravity of the situation.

"...!"

A gasp, barely audible, escaped her lips just as...

"Hey, you."

A blur of intervention.

Faster than anything else, Ragnar Lodbrok, muscles coiling like springs, launched himself with explosive speed. In a flash, he latched onto the back of the troll's head. A crisp thunk echoed as metal pierced flesh through the troll's mushroom- and conifer-ridden hide.

The troll lurched, a half-breath delay in its attempt to dislodge him. But even that sliver of time, no, even half of that, was sufficient. A gaping opening emerged, enough to land a fatal blow.

His biceps bulged, veins popping as thick fingers clamped onto the troll's head like a vice.

"Odin!"

Oh all-knowing, all-powerful god! Bear witness!

The ancient power pales before him!

The green troll withers before him!

Behold the wrath of the Berserker! No earthly might can stand against him!

—— His grip pulverised its cervical vertebrae!

Pure, unadulterated force delivered the final blow. With tremendous strength, Ragnar snapped the descendant of giants' neck using only his bare hands.

The troll went limp, collapsing with a heavy thud. It desperately tried to regenerate itself, an act rendered futile by its crushed spine and severed legs. Burning outpaced healing. As plumes of black smoke multiplied to ten, the green flesh ignited, burning completely to ashes within seconds.

"You all right, Princess?"

"...Yep."

The brush with death hung heavy in the air, unspoken.

Aslaug, however, was unscathed. The monstrous troll that loomed over her was now gone. At most, a slight bump from landing on her rear.

I feel indebted. Debts are bothersome. I need to repay him somehow.

He looks cold in that outfit. Maybe a mythril tunic...

Gripping the offered hand, she rose. Only then did she notice that Ragnar was in a far worse state. Exhaustion hung heavy in the air. Sweat poured from him, and his ragged breaths echoed.

"If you can wield magical energy, then why didn't you just use it from the start?"

"Huh?"

"Unaware, huh..." she muttered, pulling him upwards this time. Aslaug, with a powerful kick, propelled them both out of the pit.

Viking pride aside, a day and night at full sprint took its toll. Ragnar offered little resistance as she hauled him up. Landing heavily on his back, he gasped for air. The skáld rushed over, offering a flask. Ragnar took a sip before the skáld doused him with the rest.

"We did it!" he declared, looking to Aslaug.

She offered a curt nod.

"Well done, indeed!"

The skáld continued, peering into the pit.

"Completely gone, is it? Ah, some of the mushrooms and conifers remain. Strictly speaking, fire might be needed to ensure its demise. But personally, I don't see the need..."

"Hold that thought," Ragnar rasped, pushing himself up. His gaze narrowed towards the forest depths. Aslaug followed his wary stare, gasping in surprise.

A towering figure emerged from the shadows, cloaked and larger than Ragnar.

Realisation dawned on Aslaug. The unseen blade that had been flung, the one that aided Ragnar's monstrous strength in snapping the troll's neck—it was him. This colossal figure, with a head that resembled a wolf's, must have been the one.

"Ulfheðnar..." Ragnar rasped, barely a whisper.



Aslaug tilted her head in confusion.

"A wolf? Were you born with that head?" she asked.

"..."

A slight smile played on the wolf-man's lips.

So, that's how wolves smile.

Unfamiliar with the difference between wolf and dog, she had almost called him a dog-man. A close call. Two seconds later from Ragnar, and that's exactly what she would have said.

This was a wolf. A wolf-man.

But the question remained unanswered.

Why did he intervene?

"If you dare harm a single hair on my niece's head," the wolf-man snarled, revealing sharp fangs. "I, Sinfjötli, will tear your head from your body, rip out your heart, and devour it whole."

I wonder if Sinfjötli is his name?

"Niece?"

"Oh niece, I regret not being there for Heimir's passing."

"?"

Niece? What is he talking about?

Confused by the situation, Aslaug couldn't understand the wolf-man's words. Her bewilderment was evident.

"Sinfjötli?!"

The skáld nearly toppled over in surprise. He was easily shocked.

"You know him?"

"Don't you know? He's a hero of the Völsunga Saga! A member of the Völsung family, son of King Sigmund and brother of Sigurd the Dragonslayer! Though he died young and journeyed to the underworld, rumours say his power rivalled the great Sigurd's! He's a fierce warrior who slaughtered the Siggeir family!"

Brother of Sigurd the Dragonslayer? That meant...

"Father's... older brother?"

"So, wolver warrior. You're the princess' uncle!"

Ragnar's face brightened. Relief washed over him, perhaps a bit too much. A wide grin, almost like greeting family, spread across his face. Wait a minute. If he was the prospective bride's uncle, maybe it wasn't so strange?

"Hold on, Ragnar. Hold on, give me a second. Wait, wait! Huh? Huh?! Hold on just a second! This, uh, this Princess Aslaug here, is she really, truly the legendary Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd and Brynhildr!?"

"I already told you that."

"Huh?"

He truly was easily shocked.

Thanks to the skáld's commotion, Aslaug remained relatively calm.

Uncle. That meant... family? New family after losing Heimir?

Marrying Ragnar would make him family, but an uncle was different. A blood relative, a face she didn't know—Sigurd's older brother.

"My niece."

"Y-Yes." Nervous, her voice trembled slightly.

"I am but a wraith who has descended into the flesh of a wolf to observe this trial. But even if that man perishes, I swear I will protect you myself."

"Mm."

She didn't understand what a wraith was, but he seemed to be saying he'd protect her. She settled on a curt nod for now.

"Ah. Uncle, perhaps you knew about me..." Ragnar began.

"I will tear you apart if you are not worthy of my niece."

"No hesitation there... but that's fine. Uncle, you speak as if there's another trial coming?"

"The trial of the forest is over. But the next trial will come eventually."

"I see," Ragnar nodded and said, "Even so, I will see it through. Aslaug!"

"Hm?"

He suddenly called her name. What did he want?

"Hm?"

"I will marry you."

"I heard you already," she replied, though she hadn't given him her affirmation.

"That's right. You and I will one day go to the island of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table! We will become the greatest Viking king and queen, known for the greatest battles and the greatest plunder!"

What was with him all of a sudden? I wasn't expecting that!

A moment later, she realised he might have said it for the wolf-man to hear. But, at that moment, Aslaug's eyes widened in surprise at his sudden shout.

She didn't make an affirmation, hesitating to give any further reaction, and instinctively turned her face away. Did her cheeks feel hot, or was it just her imagination? Her pounding heart had calmed down earlier, but now a new warmth spread through her.

Could I be sick? Am I going to die soon and join my father, mother, and Heimir?

Right after those thoughts...

"Heh."

A flicker of a smile crossed the wolf-man's face, cryptic as ever. Despite that, she felt a surge of certainty. This hulking figure was indeed family.

Ulfheðnar. Ulfheðinn. These were the names Old Man Heimir had spoken of—warriors of the Allfather rivalling even the Berserkers. Sinfjötli, the hero, brother of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and Warrior King. He was said to have died before Sigurd's birth, yet here he stood.

Despite that, he called me his niece.

Before she knew it, her cheeks started to redden involuntarily.

Oh, what a thing to happen.

Just like Ragnar and Sinfjötli, she couldn't help but smile. Since awakening 1900 years later, her smiles had been reserved solely for Old Man Heimir and the dog. Perhaps only a few dozen in total.

The thrill of slaying the monstrous troll lingered, a shared accomplishment with the imposing figure beside her.

Without Heimir, she had believed herself utterly alone, with only the dog as company. Now, a formidable Viking warrior sought her hand, and a wolf-man claimed to be her uncle.

Does this mean I have more family now? Is it really that simple?

Uncertainty clouded her thoughts. The future held unknown trials and tribulations, and a smile felt premature. With that in mind, she steeled herself.

"What's wrong, Princess? You look so serious."

"Nothing."

She pressed her lips together, fighting the urge to smile. In the end, she made the wise decision to maintain her expressionless mask.

Chapter 3: Live On, My Love...



Chapter 3: Live On, My Love...

[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Returned / Resuming Observation / Twenty-First Century]

[Norway / Oslo / Near Oslo Central Station]

Oslo Central Station, the heart of Norway's capital, pulsed with life even after the curtain of night had fallen and the sun completely set. Like arteries and veins, sixteen surface lines and three underground lines carried the city's blood—countless railway passengers who flowed in and out of the station tirelessly.

This grand terminal was not just a symbol of urban transportation, but one of Oslo's most iconic landmarks. Of course, the harbour area offered more than just the bustling station. Renowned sites like the Royal Palace, the Cathedral, and Akershus Fortress stood as testaments to the city's rich history.

However, modern times had also left their mark. Towering in the centre of the capital, the Oslo City Shopping Center symbolised a new Oslo.

At 11:00 PM, two extraordinary figures stood on the Oslo City rooftop, a rare spot offering a view of the city's ever-flowing bloodstream, the bustling Central Station.

One was a Rider-class Servant, a hulking figure over two metres tall clad in a hooded coat.

"Sir Percival," he whispered, addressing the Lancer-class Servant already standing in full armour. "I hear we are currently in the midst of an intermission."

"Indeed," Percival confirmed.

"Would it be permissible for us to engage in mortal combat if it's not between Servants and Masters?" Rider pressed.

"No, that's..." The knight with the Holy Lance shook his head solemnly. "While the Doubles Grail War's rules remain unclear, considering the purpose of the intermission, I believe any form of combat is discouraged."

This answer resonated with the same honesty that defined his bravery and soul.

Rider nodded and offered, "Then, how about something else?"

"That's..."

A premonition of violence flickered across the knight's face. He was about to choose his words of dissuasion carefully when... from the shadows blanketing the rooftop, a grotesque apparition emerged, rising and swaying to a height of about three metres.

Percival instinctively lunged with the butt of his lance, but was a hair too slow. The Knight of the Holy Lance would never be caught off guard by some unknown monster. Its attempt to engulf and digest him was child's play.

However, someone else had moved faster, their attack a blur of motion that pierced the creature. In other words...

"My apologies, Sir Percival. I've already dealt with it."

Five claws extended from his fingers, tearing through the bodies in a hail of strikes possessing divine speed, reducing the newly appeared apparitions to masses of flesh.

"Your Noble Phantasm, I see."

"Nay. My claws merely grow quickly."

A joke, perhaps... no, not at all.

Rider continued without missing a beat.

"This body, you see, is already dead. Ah, no. I wasn't referring to how Heroic Spirits are shadows of the Human Order. Perhaps because I animate this dead flesh, my metabolism is far too high by modern standards. I thought my claws would stop growing once I was summoned as a Servant, but alas..."

He let out a sigh of exasperation. "You see, I'm constantly trying to keep these claws from popping out."

"A fascinating power, Rider," Percival conceded, "and what tremendous speed. I presumed it was a scout sent by Caster before the intermission, but a single blow?"

"I, too, was a warrior once," Rider said as he sat down.

He rummaged through his coat and produced a few cans of what appeared to be alcohol.

The knight's eyebrows shot up. They had been given some currency by their Master and his sister, but it was meant for information gathering or disguise in the Doubles Grail War.

"How about a drink, Sir Percival? I hear an intermission is a time for rest."

"I'm afraid not, Rider," Percival demurred. "We..."

"I'm sorry, but I'd like you to open it. I can only punch holes in them," Rider replied.

Understanding dawned. His fingers were indeed too large and claws too sharp for the delicate task. Opening a can with a single hand would be a challenge, so he put his lance aside. He sat down opposite Rider and opened one, then another.

"Hm? Sir Percival..." Rider started.

"Just one. And don't tell Master."

To his marvel, Rider had stashed more than ten cans of alcohol under his coat. As the trains running through Oslo Central Station below gradually ceased and the flow of people dwindled, they finished all the cans.

Rider then muttered, "Can we kill those two?"

"Victory is determined by fate," Percival replied, his answer unwavering from before. "I swear on my Holy Lance that I will give it my all."

It was a true answer, reflecting his unchanging bravery and soul.

Rider's head dipped beneath his coat, leaving it unclear whether he was nodding or shaking his head in response.

"What about you?"

"Well..."

Rider looked up at the sky. Thick clouds shrouded Bjørvika, obscuring both the moon and stars. Nevertheless, the man in the coat turned his gaze towards the heavens without hesitation, as if searching for two ravens dancing in the starless night sky...

"...I have a beloved family member, Sir Percival. She is more precious than anything, irreplaceable, and must be protected. That is why I chose to fight in this era."

"Family?"

"Yes."

The knight immediately understood that Rider wasn't referring to the past. At least for the man in the coat, family was a precious thing that continued to exist in the present.

"I live and die for the blood of my clan," the man murmured softly, not for anyone else's ears, but as a small and honourable prayer, nonetheless.

†

{Oh, that's strange. I hadn't intended to weave the narrative in that direction. Please refrain from going off on your own. We are supposed to maintain the perspective of our king and queen whenever possible. Channel surfing? Montages? I enjoy those things too, but you really must stop intervening so suddenly! See? They're already on the lookout for ravens... and your whims are another annoyance, old man. Well, I'll just have to register a macro for the perspective shift circuit then.}

[Observation Target / Shift / Macro Registered]

[Compilation Continuum Maintained / Target Shifted / Twenty-first Century / Macro Registered]

[Norway / Oslo / Oslo Opera House]

†

She enjoyed standing in the rain, forgoing the umbrella. Each raindrop cascading down her skin felt like a thread connecting her to the vast sky above. The rain seemed to wash away her worries and troubles, leaving her in a strangely serene

mood. It was almost as if she were the only one in the world, a sense of deep focus settling over her.

Rain, she realised, was the perfect environment for contemplation. She probably loved water. Being soaked somehow dramatically enhanced her mental clarity.

So, it was no surprise that Lemina Eltfromm was in the waiting room's attached bathroom. A shower would have to suffice for now, a substitute for the cleansing rain.

Hot water was a necessity, as the February chill of Oslo seeped even indoors. It wasn't just the unexpected encounter with the Istorre siblings that prompted this need to wash away. Even before returning to the Oslo Opera House after dinner, she'd planned a cleansing ritual to clear her head.

"Ah... how soothing..."

The simmering excitement of the Doubles Grail War began to recede, replaced by a refreshing clarity.



It felt like a mental reset, a return from a state of excitement to her everyday life. Perhaps it was an inherent connection—her magecraft attribute was in fact water, after all.

While Lemina, her father, and her grandmother, all mages, held a dismissive view on reincarnation, a concept prevalent in Eastern philosophies like Hinduism and Buddhism, she couldn't help but harbour a secret belief. If past lives did exist, hers must have belonged to an aquatic creature or a water-dwelling Phantasm.

The analysis of her Origin remained incomplete, but perhaps...

"Well, then..."

She glanced at the Command Seal shimmering on her right hand and closed her eyes, summoning the memory from moments ago.

Just after returning to the waiting room, a message arrived. It was from her esteemed Caules Forvedge, a survivor of a previous Holy Grail War.

He was the last head of the Yggdmillennia, the man who shouldered the monumental task of dismantling the founderless clan. A tragic hero who'd sacrificed himself, becoming a de facto hostage sent to the Clock Tower, to save his entire family, including the branch houses, from annihilation.

"I saw your message. You fought Percival?"

And a real-time voice call at that!

The familiar SNS icon on her phone screen sent a jolt of joy through her, prompting her to jump a few centimetres. Berserker, ever the brute, muttered something outrageous about food poisoning, while the silver maiden remained utterly indifferent.

For Lemina, it was a wave of immense relief and gratitude. She wouldn't forget. In the previous Grail War, Caules Forvedge Yggdmillennia and his Servant had faced none other than Mordred, the thirteenth seat of the Round Table, whose rebellion led to the fall of Britain!

Yes, a Knight of the Round Table. Just like Sir Percival, whom she considered her greatest adversary, these were legendary knights who gathered around King

Arthur, Britain's greatest hero. All exceptional figures, guaranteed to be summoned as Servants of the knight classes.

In essence, Caules was a predecessor with firsthand experience of battling the Knights of the Round Table. She had sent him a message with a sliver of hope, never expecting a direct voice call! Even though there would definitely be some surveillance!

"My apologies, Lemina. I wasn't able to learn anything on Percival directly from him. But Sir Percival is a regular in the Subspecies Holy Grail War, a multi-time champion, isn't he? We have someone here who compiles battle data from each war. By feeding it through a formula I'm developing, I might be able to extract information relevant to your current situation."

"Thank... you?"

"As the saying goes, know a hundred battles and you will never be in peril. Especially for you, Lemina. The more experience you accumulate, the stronger you become. It suits your nature."

"Perhaps," she conceded, tilting her head like a child.

The silver maiden in the back mimicked the gesture, observing Lemina intently. Berserker flicked his gaze between them, confused.

Lemina waved dismissively. "It's nothing, Berserker. Don't worry."

Relief washed over her—Caules was willing to help. However, a few things piqued her curiosity.

"What exactly do you mean by 'feeding it through a formula'?"

His relatively concise reply arrived soon after. Apparently, he was developing a new formula. He sought to implement finely tuned electrical magecraft as the secret ingredient that'd push the operations and programs running on a computer to the next level. Cyber magecraft, so to speak, though he wouldn't go as far as to call it that.

^{Cyber Formula}
"I call it Code Cast."

The concept was revolutionary, beyond Lemina's comprehension. She recalled Caules transferring to another department after graduating from the prestigious El-Melloi classroom. Now, for some reason, he was a constant presence there despite graduating.

Fusing technology and the arcane... Caules, you never cease to amaze me!

She verbally expressed her admiration.

"No, Lemina, you flatter me. It's a joint project with the Atlas Institute. They're the driving force behind it, while I'm just a collaborator of sorts."

"But you're the one who came up with the idea, right?"

"If not for my teacher's connections to Atlas, I would've been laughed out of the room instead."

"I highly doubt that."

Her voice resonated with genuine respect, though she knew long-distance communication, be it telepathic or technological, couldn't fully convey the depth of her emotions.

"In any case, I'll put it to the test. Information on Percival—legends, plays, historical accounts within the mage world, past Subspecies Grail War results, eyewitness testimonies, and so on—I'll integrate it all and generate a numerical prediction of both the Heroic Spirit Percival and the Holy Lance's magical output."

"Caules, that's incredible! You're a genius!"

"It's simply a matter of programming. A truly skilled mage wouldn't rely on some computer program; they'd craft an analytical formula through magecraft alone."

"That's still incredible!"

That summed up their conversation.

Dripping wet, Lemina opened her eyes in the shower.

The raw data from the formula's calculations flooded her mobile phone instantly. The results were brutally simple. The numerical outputs painted a grim picture.

Bluntly put, activation of the Holy Lance Longinus' True Name spelled defeat. Initiation time, full activation, recoil, consumption, range, power—every aspect was top-tier. It boasted incredible speed, low energy consumption, super-long range, and devastating power. Even without a True Name release, it could unleash a

barrage of mana-infused slashes. It was a Noble Phantasm that boasted both versatility and ease of use.

She'd already gathered intel on Berserker and the girl's Noble Phantasms. While she hadn't witnessed their True Name activations, she had a good grasp of their capabilities. Berserker's seemed to be a physical enhancement type, though details remained obscure. The girl wielded a continuously active mythril harp that transformed into a bow or spear, alongside a powerful offensive Noble Phantasm. This latter weapon boasted immense power, but its activation time appeared to be a weakness. Even when accompanied by a large fame boost, a direct confrontation with the Holy Lance was highly undesirable.

As an extra measure, she'd unearthed the exact results of past Subspecies Holy Grail Wars. Sir Percival had been summoned three times, achieving complete victory in each instance.

"..."

Rendered speechless, Lemina's mind raced. Feverish with worry, she considered a cold shower but dismissed the thought. Oslo's nighttime temperature dipped to seven degrees below zero—a suicidal act for anyone but an Eastern monk or a Far Eastern Shugendo practitioner.

One opponent was a Lancer—Sir Percival of the Round Table, undoubtedly a formidable foe. The other, a Rider, commandeered the underworld ship. Berserker had hinted at their possible True Name. Undoubtedly, another powerful Heroic Spirit.

Despite their individual strength, their Noble Phantasms also had frightening synergy. The underworld ship likely possessed a super-speed flight ability. Additionally, its size offered ample space for three occupants. In the worst-case scenario, they could launch a devastating attack—an instantaneous onslaught by the Holy Lance from a flying vessel. How could they possibly counter an underworld ship firing magical projectiles at godlike speed?

The question echoed in her mind.

How to fight? How to win? Think, think, think, think.

What would the founder do? No, what would she do?

She lacked the brilliance of Darnic, the founder. Caules often praised her, but she was ultimately just herself. In terms of abilities, she was a run-of-the-mill alchemist and elemental conversion mage, her magic crest unsuited for meticulous research. Besides her beauty, her greatest asset was her unwavering foolhardiness.

"Don't be afraid, Lemina Eltfromm Yggdmillenia!"

With a resolute shout, she slammed her head against the wall—not a full-blown impact, but hard enough to sting. It rattled her skull, the dull pain momentarily sharpening her focus and mimicking the feeling of being caught in a real downpour. And then...

"Announcement. Fifteen minutes remain until the end of the intermission and the activation of Rule X."

The booming voice sliced through the shower's hiss, reaching Lemina's eardrums. She knew the clock was ticking. Fifteen minutes to wipe her body, dry her hair, and finish her makeup—a tight squeeze for most, but a breeze for her. While the activation of Rule X surprised her, it wasn't entirely unexpected.

Underestimating me, are you, Istorre siblings?

Activating Rule X with their True Names already revealed—a blatant display of absolute confidence. They clearly saw Lemina's team as complete underdogs.

A grin, not of anger, but of exhilarating certainty, stretched across her face.

I see it. I see it, I see it, I see it, I see it!

Their arrogance gives me an opening. Even a little girl can topple the Istorre family. With the luck of Scandinavia's strongest on my side and my own cunning, victory will be mine.

"Are you okay?"

A voice filtered through the thick steam. Through the cascading water, Lemina saw the silver maiden standing there.

"I heard a strange noise."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry for the wait. I'll be out soon. Call Berserker."

"Okay."

The girl nodded, but didn't leave. *What's wrong?*

It took her about two seconds to realise that she had something to say.

"What is it?"

"You seem all right now. The calculation results, right? You looked like you were about to die when you saw them."

"Ah..."

Busted.

"Sorry for worrying you. I'm fine now."

Taking a long soak wasn't just about hygiene; it also served as a shield to hide her initial shock and an opportunity to regroup. Of course, sorting her thoughts was also a legitimate reason. Regardless, while the first part wasn't going so well, the second was moving forward steadily.

She saw a path to victory. All she needed now was one final push!

With a decisive twist of the faucet, Lemina shut off the shower. Raising her voice, she declared, "All right! You two are going down!"

†

"The Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War resumes!"

A spotlight bathed Oslo Opera House's Main Stage, centring on the booming voice echoing from the microphone. It belonged to Dunkelbelt Heidowolf, the representative organiser of the Doubles Grail War. This mage, clad in mirrored sunglasses that lended a theatrical air to his every movement, seemed more like a clown than a host or conductor.

The Heidowolf family, though boasting an ancient Norwegian lineage, lacked the financial muscle to host a full-fledged Grail War. Thus, they formed a temporary alliance with several Clock Tower-affiliated families in Scandinavia. This consortium, bolstered by anonymous sponsorships from powerful mages, became the event's official organisers. Dunkelbelt, their figurehead, typically stayed behind the scenes, only taking centre stage for the opening and closing ceremonies, and the invocation of Rule X.

"The resumption coincides with the declaration of Rule X, courtesy of none other than the third Master, the Istorre siblings!"

The spotlight swivelled, revealing a tall man and his younger sister standing side-by-side on the corner of the stage. The Istorre siblings. The audience, a collection of powerful mages and Clock Tower associates invited by the organisers, erupted in polite applause.

Yes, an audience. The Doubles Grail War had an audience. They observed the clashes from a secure Command Stage while the summoned Heroic Spirits, the true combatants, battled it out across a designated Battle Stage—the entire city of Oslo. This unique format, featuring four teams of two Heroic Spirits each, marked a historic first for the Subspecies Grail Wars.

The intermission wasn't for the sake of the combatants, but for the spectators. A trivial issue to be fair, but a gruelling 24-hour event would have placed a burden on the audience as well. While recorded and edited footage was a possibility, it wouldn't capture the raw, real-time intensity of the battles.

The Doubles Grail War was, in essence, a magnificent spectacle. Direct combat by the Masters was heavily restricted, with their role relegated to observing alongside the spectators in the secure Command Stage. The act of killing, an integral part of this clandestine urban magical ritual, fell solely to the summoned Heroic Spirits. Masters and their Heroic Spirits weren't partners bound by fate, but akin to commanders and their executors instead.

Dunkelbelt, so the rumours went, believed the original Holy Grail War to be barbaric. The Subspecies Grail, with its ability to replace fallen Heroic Spirits, offered a solution. However, living mages, dedicated to uncovering the truth and reaching the Fount of Origination in the modern world, were irreplaceable treasures. Wouldn't it be disrespectful to their lineages and the past for them to throw their lives away in reckless battles? Few openly supported this view, but it did garner enough backing from the magecraft world in the form of substantial investments to birth the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War.

"Now, Master Istorre," Dunkelbelt addressed the stage, raising his hand. "As part of your invocation of Rule X, please specify the central point of the designated protected area."

A magical tool, closely resembling a 600-inch LCD screen, unfolded above the stage. The real-time image of the entire Oslo map, generated by magecraft, almost seemed digital.

"The southern tip of Lake Maridalsvannet," intoned Gagam Istorre in a soft, composed voice.

The massive lake on Oslo's northern outskirts materialised on the screen, its southern end marked by a red circle with a three-kilometre radius.

"In accordance with the declaration of Special Rule X," Dunkelbelt boomed, "the two Heroic Spirits under the Istorres' command will stand by for battle at a designated location for one hour. A picturesque suburban location, but let's find a suitable landmark... Ah! The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology! Perfect. If there are no objections, consider this your designated standby point."

"No objections here," replied Gagam.

"Excellent! Then it's settled. As a reward for your bold decision to expose your Heroic Spirits during the Holy Grail War, the Istorre siblings, the third Master, will be granted an additional Command Seal."

Dunkelbelt snapped his fingers.

The Command Seal on Gagam's right hand, depleted to two strokes, flickered back to three. Evidently, one had already been used.

Command Seals, etched on the backs of each Master's hand, were their right of participation in the Subspecies Grail's ritual. They symbolised the Master-Servant contract with two Heroic Spirits and functioned as a powerful magical resource capable of miraculous feats. It was no exaggeration to say they were weapons that could decide the battle's outcome.

"We proceed to the next stage of Rule X," Dunkelbelt boomed. "Will any faction be bold enough to answer the Istorres' courageous proclamation? This presents a golden opportunity for the others! Whatever need for restraint and

caution there once was has now been replaced with the golden chance for an all-out assault!"

Declaring Rule X offered the enticing advantage of a replenished Command Seal but came at a cost: a one-hour forced defence at a designated location. Any form of attack, from afar or close quarters, or a discovery of the attackers beforehand, would give the defenders the right to strike back.

The advantages afforded to the attackers were not as clear-cut as the opposing side. Regardless, the ability to strike with all preparations complete granted them an undeniable advantage. No faction would readily volunteer for the Rule unless supremely confident in their Servants and Noble Phantasms. However, ignoring it meant letting others continuously replenish their Command Seals—a nightmarish prospect.

Rule X. Responding to it invites trouble, yet ignoring it carries its own risks. Of course, I accept the challenge.

Muttering under her breath, Lemina marched purposefully onto the stage, her steps echoing deliberately. The spotlight bathed her in its glow. Standing tall, hand on hip for maximum audience impact, a murmur rippled through the crowd.

It wasn't just her youthful beauty that surprised them—even younger than the already young mages Gagam and Memel—but the unexpected appearance of the fourth Master, a remnant of the dismantled Yggdmillennia clan.

"Well, well. If it isn't you," Memel chuckled lightly. "If you're going to back down, now's your chance, little girl. Our Servant's Holy Lance has already given yours a taste of its power, wouldn't you agree?"

"Took the words right out of my mouth, kid," Lemina countered.

"You!" she bristled.

"Memel," the older brother calmly reprimanded his sister, who was about to fall for the provocation.

It was a repeat of the waffle incident.

Lemina, recognizing the futility of a psychological attack on Gagam, flashed a sly smile at the emotionless, reptilian man.

"You got me. I have no choice but to admit that I got outplayed."

Memel raised an eyebrow, suspicion flickering across her face. "What?"

"I was planning to declare Rule X myself," Lemina explained, "but you beat me to it. So, the first round goes to you. Man, and I could really use a Command Seal right now."

"...Pfft."

A chuckle escaped Gagam's lips. So this cold-blooded man *could* laugh after all. Did he find her words amusing, or did he sense the steel beneath her playful facade?

If it was the former, he was merely small fry. But if he sensed the true weight of her resolve... for now, her intuition leaned towards the latter.

"Enough of this nonsense, Yggdmillennia!" Memel snapped. "How dare you anger my brother!"

"He seems to be laughing," Lemina countered.

"No, he's not. He only laughs for me," Memel insisted.

"Right, right," Lemina shrugged. "My sincerest apologies for the misunderstanding."

"Pitiful Yggdmillennia. To go mad in pursuit of a Subspecies Grail."

The comment hung heavy in the air. She seemed to loathe the fact that her brother had spared a laugh for someone other than her. It was a petty jab, hardly worth a response, but Lemina decided to play into it anyway.

With a wink, she acknowledged, "Perhaps I *am* a little mad. I won't deny it. Who wouldn't be, diving into a Subspecies Grail War and picking a head-on fight with the Istorre siblings? Regardless, there's no changing the fact that you two won the first round." Her smile stretched wider. "But now? I'd win."

"Win, you say? Ha! You'd dare challenge our Lancer? A Knight of the Round Table who wields a Holy Lance?" Memel scoffed.

Look, it wasn't meant to be funny.

But fine, you want a fight? Bring it on.

Her lungs filled, once, twice, with a deep, deliberate pull, willing her vocal cords open. Projecting from the stage, her voice boomed, carrying to the very edge of the audience seats. "I said I'll fight! So come at me!"

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Near the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology]

Atop a house in Oslo's northern suburbs... a black whirlwind hovered silently. Standing resolute was the last Viking of the age, clad in heavy, razor-sharp black steel. His right hand gripped a colossal battle axe capable of cleaving any foe in two, while his left held a heart-gouging dagger. A flash of silver peeked from beneath his leather jacket—a mythril tunic thrumming with dense magical energy.

Beside him hovered a testament to the lost era of arcana and fantasy: a silver-haired maiden, the last Valkyrie. Runes of flight kept her aloft, her form clad in shimmering magical armour. Her hands grasped the transformed form of a grand harp—a mythril halberd. Even under the starless night sky, the silver threads of her hair seemed to sparkle brilliantly, framed by a headdress adorned with a dragon's horn.

"Seems we've claimed first dibs. Thoughts?"

"Hm..."

"I'd like to settle this before the other factions arrive."



†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology Rooftop]

From the shadows of his hooded cloak, a towering figure emanated a fierce gaze—a lone cavalryman, veteran of countless battles. Beside him, a spearman stood with unwavering posture, his Holy Lance held low in his right hand. Together, they formed the core of the Istorre faction.

Minutes ticked by after Rule X's activation. The two warriors, locked in an unspoken vigil, finally saw the cavalryman break the silence.

"Percival," he rumbled.

"Yes," the spearman replied calmly.

A pause stretched before the cavalryman continued.

"I stand beside you in this fight."

"And I, too," the spearman said, "will fight at your side, securing victory for our Master."

"Indeed."

The cavalryman nodded silently, then shook his head slightly.

"...My apologies, knight."

"For what is there to apologise for?"

"I yearn to be your true comrade, but a curse bestowed by my god binds me, preventing me from opening my heart."

"A curse? From your god..."

"Let it be," the cavalryman interrupted. "I hold no regrets. My existence is solely for my mission."

The spearman smiled. "Rider," he addressed him, "that's all I need to hear. As your comrade-in-arms, I shall respect your mission to the fullest."

"What a noble yet foolish man you are, Percival."

"So I've been told."

Both spoke with genuine conviction. The cavalryman's words bore no falsehood, and the spearman's sincerity shone through. In that silent exchange, a new victory condition for this Subspecies Grail War formed between them. They did not verbalise it, nor did they confirm it.

However, they both shared the same sentiment. This was the birth of a bond, the first forged in the crucible of the Doubles Grail War.



†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Oslo Opera House]

"The stalemate continues. Both teams remain cautious, waiting for the other to make the first move!"

The 600-inch screen displayed a tense standoff. On one side, Berserker and Archer of the Eltfromm faction lurked, poised to strike. On the other, Lancer and Rider of the Istorre faction stood vigilant, adhering to Rule X.

The image of the silver maiden casting a line-of-sight defence rune flickered slightly, but it was not unviewable. It wasn't the organisers' remote viewing tools that bypassed the Age of Gods-level defence; a pre-tournament agreement ensured unobstructed observation for the Doubles Grail War.

"A dull start, wouldn't you agree, remote viewers?" boomed Dunkelbelt, the emcee.

The display beside him flickered to life with a flurry of comments.

Black Raven: Our time is precious.

Green Woods: Indeed, this stalemate is rather troublesome.

Immortal Peach: But within the rules, nonetheless. No need for criticism.

Surging Waves: The first Doubles Grail War, the first Rule X. Let's enjoy the spectacle!

Countless usernames and comments scrolled by. These were mages who, despite receiving invitations, opted to watch the livestream at their bases over a trip to Oslo. Wealthy patrons, seemingly close to the organisers, preferred remote viewing to spectator seats. Lemina couldn't pinpoint the exact number, but it was likely in the double-digits.

All aliases, undoubtedly. Akin to a livestream's comments section, she thought, wondering how many other mages shared the sentiment.

Technology, the antithesis of the arcane, often repelled mages. Yet, as always, exceptions existed.

Caules Forvedge, for instance, bridged the gap between the two, a rare case in the world of magecraft. The Atlas Institute offered a more prominent exception, albeit in a slightly different direction.

One of the three factions of the Mages' Association, this organisation that derived its name from a titan manifested their arcana as technology. Spells and chants were replaced by special Mystic Codes, amulets, and magical tools—the very screen they were using and the global live streaming system were both powered by Atlas technology, Lemina had heard.

Dunkelbelt's feigned question broke the silence. "I thank you for your generosity! Have you chosen your favourites, everyone?"

A barrage of comments followed.

White Night: The first Master, the Maltheim faction, without a doubt.

Dream Phantasm: Oh no, don't forget about Joanne Merethul.

Black Raven: The second Master? She won a Subspecies Grail War before, didn't she?

Red Sun: The Istorre faction inspire great confidence.

War Tactics: I applaud the fourth Master, the Eltfromm's faction's decision making.

"Hahahaha, War Tactics, you have a great sense of humour!"

A chuckle rippled through the audience at Dunkelbelt's following jest.

I'll remember those who laughed. Thanks, War Tactics, whoever you are.

"Oh my?" A feigned gesture of surprise.

What now? How is he going to ridicule me this time?

Lemina, half-bored and half-squinting at the emcee, wondered, when...

"Just now, the Istorres have received five gold chips!"

"No way."

Gold chips. It was impossible not to widen her eyes at that.

Chips—a virtual tip system allowing real-time, tax-free investment in favoured factions. The amount, however, was staggering. Five tiers existed: iron, bronze, silver, gold, and platinum. Gold, the second-highest, was rumoured to be worth roughly one million euros per chip. Her sense of financial reality shattered and her world swirled. The possibilities—new Tattras coats, nights at the Plaza Athénée, endless Debaube & Gallais chocolates—made her so envious she could die.

Down with the bourgeoisie! I can't stand these pretentious mages who act like aristocrats!

"Ah, I see. That explains the gold chips," Dunkelbelt chuckled. "Behold, ladies and gentlemen!" He gestured gracefully towards the Istorre siblings.

No, not both. Lemina quickly realised that he was pointing solely at Gagam Istorre. A spotlight illuminated him. His left eye glinted visibly, reflecting the light.

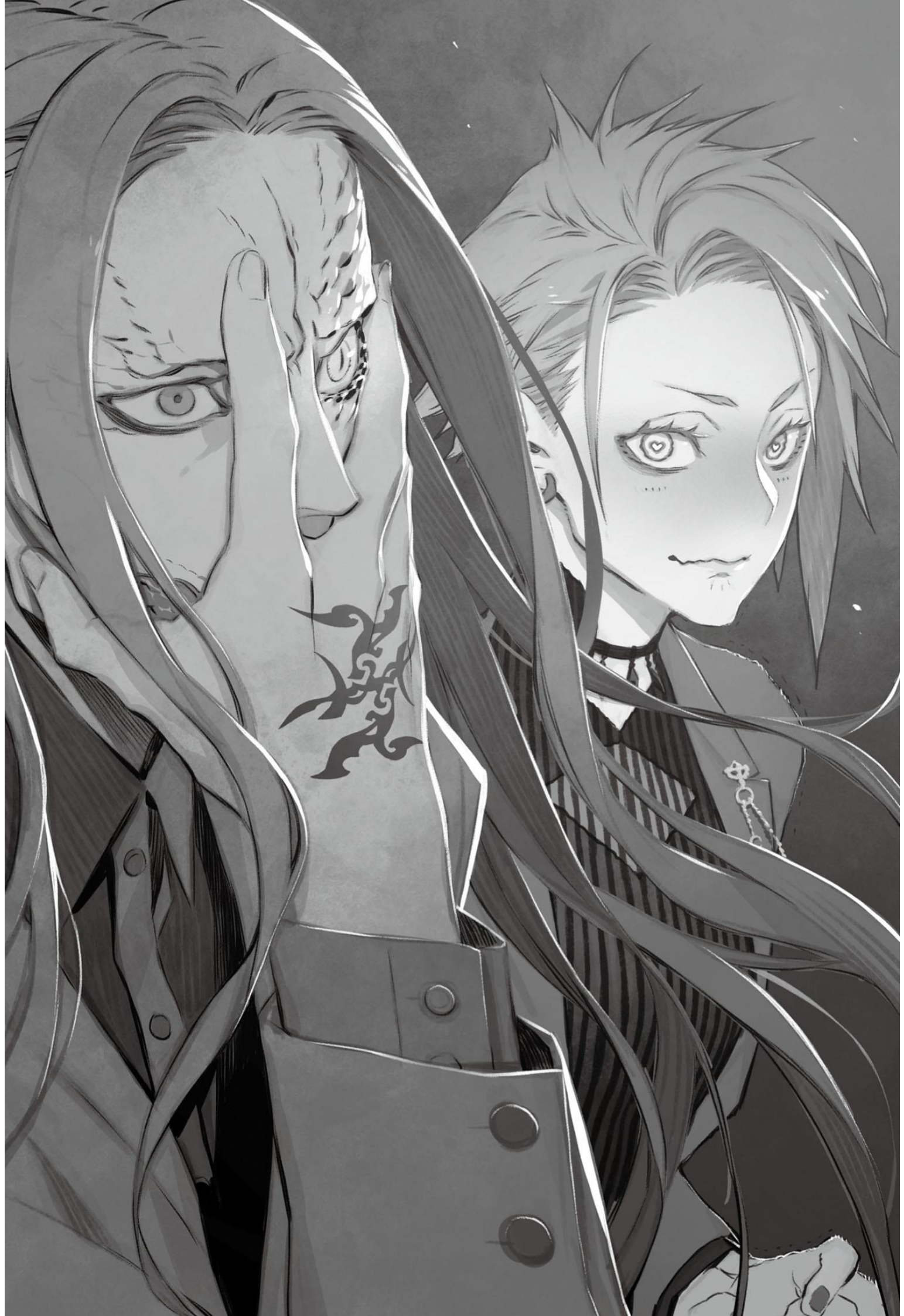
Dwell within my body
"Dormir"

A one-count incantation, likely shortened using his Magic Crest. Visible changes began. His pupils narrowed vertically, and the right half of his face hardened into scales.

Spiritual Evocation. The transformation, the chant's content, and the Istorres' lineage made it an evident deduction. The extent of his transformation suggested mastery or an exceptional affinity with the apparent nature spirit he was channelling. Reptilian in nature, it was likely a snake or a lizard!

A few gasps of admiration rose from the audience for the masterful display. Bronze and iron chips continued to trickle in from remote viewers.

"Master Gagam Istorre resorts to Spiritual Evocation! What is his goal? Without using a Command Seal, it would be difficult to strengthen his Servants who are several kilometres away. A direct attack spell wouldn't be completely out of the cards, but it doesn't seem too likely. So, what could it be?"



"...!"

Lemina involuntarily held her breath, panic threatening to surface. Despite her best efforts to appear composed before the crowd, the sight before her was unsettling.

This can't be happening! No way, no way, no way! I can take a handsome reptilian visage, but this is just way too much! He looks like a monster straight out of a 'Screaming Mad George' flick! What is he trying to achieve with his Spiritual Evocation? What in the world is that?! I can't take it!

Despite her familiarity with the arcane, Lemina wasn't accustomed to such monstrous entities. Every encounter triggered a flood of childhood memories—cheesy special effects movies from the 80s and 90s her uncle had subjected her to as a form of 'elite education.' Her favourites, by the way, were 'Guyver,' 'Critters,' 'Critters 2,' and 'Deadly Spawn 2.'

With the way he was transforming, it wouldn't be a surprise if his sister was a little shaken as well. While desperately trying to suppress her fear and agitation, Lemina looked at her standing next to Gagam.

"!"

Is she for real? She's blushing while glancing at him!

It was undeniable. Memel's cheeks burned a rosy red as she stole glances at Gagam, the redness intensifying with each passing moment, accompanied by feverish mutterings all the while.

Straining to lip-read, Lemina deciphered, "Brother... oh, that dignified look on your face! You're becoming even more handsome with every passing moment! This is... unbearable. I must control myself; I mustn't lose composure. This is the grand stage, after all, and it would be a disgrace to the Istorre name to appear flustered in front of these anonymous dignitaries who refuse to show themselves..."

Was Memel losing her mind? Her fighting spirit?

No. It dawned on Lemina—this was a display of overwhelming composure, a show of confidence bordering on arrogance. What was this Spiritual Evocation for?

What was its true purpose, and why did it evoke such a reaction from Memel, who seemed far more tense than Lemina about the Doubles Grail War?

Finally, Gagam Istorre's transformation reached its peak. The structure and colour of his left eye had morphed entirely, resembling that of a reptile.

A single, chilling phrase escaped his lips: "Found them."

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Near the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology]

A wave of primal loathing washed over Ragnar Lodbrok as he sensed their stalker's gaze. Unlike the silver maiden's arcane aura, this was the intense, unwavering gaze of a predator, a snake fixated on its prey. The warrior flinched slightly, oblivious to the subtle difference between a dragon and a snake.

He couldn't spare a moment to listen to the music playing through his iPod nano earbuds. Instinctually, he shielded the girl hovering beside him on the rooftop. But that was all he could manage. They were out of time.

Defensive manoeuvres were a luxury he couldn't afford, let alone a counterattack. Ragnar could only brace himself for the inevitable pain that was about to come.

The surprise attack came from an unimaginable angle. The two figures standing on the rooftop of the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, whom he had been observing with utmost vigilance, had vanished in a blink of an eye.

A towering, wild figure, well over two metres tall, had silently appeared behind Ragnar and the maiden, who were supposed to be two kilometres away.

"RAGGGHHHHHHH!"

A beast-like roar accompanied the approaching behemoth. Beyond its back, Ragnar glimpsed the underworld ship carrying the Lancer with the Holy Spear.

That ship can hide its path of movement!

This was a flawlessly executed ambush.

Ragnar, the warrior, had no way of knowing the mechanics behind this feat. A temporary dive into the gaps in the world's texture, using the unique properties of the underworld ship. By slipping into these gaps, the ship achieved not only complete concealment of its aura—suppressing killing intent, magic, heat, movement, and all other information—comparable to an Assassin's Presence Concealment skill, but also allowed for high-speed movement.

When it disappeared after the battle at the Oslo City Hall it had indeed, literally, vanished from the world. While inferior to an instantaneous transfer using a Command Seal, it functioned as a kind of pseudo-instantaneous movement. In other words, Rider's attack was a surefire blow, extremely difficult to detect, avoid, or defend against!

"You haven't changed a bit, you craven whelp!" A thunderous voice boomed as a giant fist slammed into Ragnar.

The suddenness of the attack tore the hood from Rider's head, revealing a familiar face—a wolf! A wolven warrior with fangs bared in a snarl of rage and murderous intent. The Rider of the Istorre faction, his True Name was...

"...Sinfjötli!"

Ragnar's eyes widened as he took the full force of the formidable blow to his central abdomen.

It was only then that he realised his blunder. He, the hunter, had become the hunted. But shock and regret didn't stop him. His heart remained calm, focused, and unclouded. He'd resolved himself for this confrontation.

Ah, it's been a while. I know your scent, Uncle.

So, despite the unexpected blow, the warrior did not retreat. He gritted his teeth against the excruciating pain of several completely shattered ribs and ruptured internal organs, forcing down the blood clot rising in his throat. With a measured swing, he launched a counterattack with his heavy axe, aiming to crush the giant fist without harming the precious princess he held protectively against his chest. It was a half-reflexive attack, but he put all his killing intent into it.

No matter if it was the Saint Graph of a Servant, the epitome of arcana and fantasy, legendary heroes considered supernatural weapons, he would crush their skull, shatter their brain and spinal cord, and scatter their innards if his axe found its mark. He'd defy the impossible odds, the pronouncements of gods and men alike. To the enemy, he roared, and his axe sang a deadly song through the air.

"...Gh!"

A guttural growl echoed as a giant, clawed hand intercepted the axe's descent, the immense force of the five fingers locking the deadly weapon in its grasp.

Suddenly, their eyes met.

"Your life will be mine! I'll kill you, Berserker!"

The enraged wolf... He had never seen such a thing before. Not the instinctive anger of a predator seeking prey, but a manifestation of wrath guided by reason and intellect.

"I'll kill you right here and now! And I'll be the one to save my niece!"

He roared and delivered a heavy kick. Ragnar didn't dodge. He took the full brunt of the blow to his stomach, sending him flying high into the air away from the battlefield.

Of course, he held the maiden close, her fragile form posing a challenge to shield during his airborne flight. A fleeting glance in mid-air met the Lancer's gaze on the underworld ship.

He quickly realised why he wasn't being pursued. Lancer was repaying a due. Was that man really determined to be a knight to the very end, even in this Doubles Grail War?

"It's so hot," the maiden murmured, seemingly activating a rune. The mythril spear in her hand dissolved, reforming into a shape closer to its original form—a large harp. This silver instrument, with its elegant curves reminiscent of a winged swan, was a gift from her half-goddess mother, Brynhildr.

It was said to be an external wing granting the user freedom to soar through the skies. Unlike levitation or flight achieved through magical energy or runes, becoming one with the winged harp granted the maiden the ability to reach supersonic speeds and pierce the stratosphere. Her body and wings became one as she

rode the wind, breaking the sound barrier in a single breath to put distance between them and the attackers.

Shielded within the magical wind, Ragnar clung desperately to a part of the wing, barely managing a strained reply, "Whoaaaa... This is no easy ride!"

"Why did you let them find us before we could even strike? Are you an idiot?"

"Can't deny that, but we've got an even bigger problem on our hands now. Your... wolf-headed uncle Sinfjötli. I guess you wouldn't understand."

The wind whipped his words away, and the maiden offered no response. She likely had no memory of him, just as she didn't remember Ragnar.

"Hold on for now," he rasped. "First, let's get some distance..."

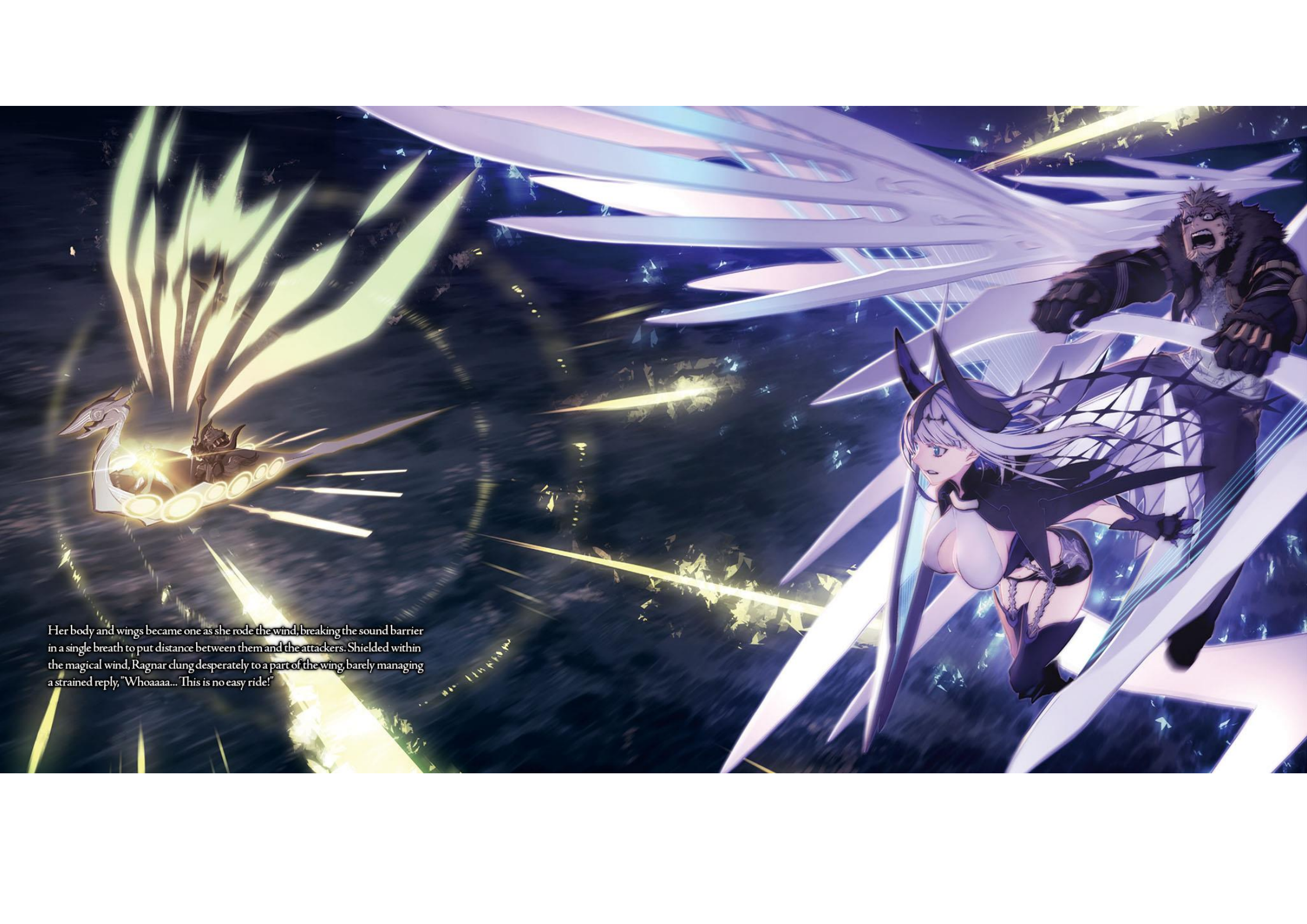
His words were cut short. The warrior's naive hope of escape vanished in an instant. The underworld ship, crossing the gaps, was closing in fast!

Ragnar, unaware of the reason for its incredible speed, could only gasp in awe.

"...!"

A voice boomed from the ship. "Now, shall we resume our duel?"

The knight raised his Holy Lance once more, with whatever restraint he once had seemingly exhausted after his first strike. Faster than Ragnar could even process the situation, the spear pulsed with light, the energy hurtling towards the high-speeding maiden with him clinging to her wing.



Her body and wings became one as she rode the wind, breaking the sound barrier in a single breath to put distance between them and the attackers. Shielded within the magical wind, Ragnar clung desperately to a part of the wing, barely managing a strained reply, "Whoaaaa... This is no easy ride!"

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Oslo Opera House]

Gagam Istorre! Damn it, he stole the initiative right out of my hands!

Lemina clicked her tongue sharply on the stage, unfazed by the spectators' attention. It wasn't just confidence in their summoned Heroic Spirits; declaring Rule X stemmed from their ability to detect enemy entities through Spiritual Evocation!

"The tension mounts! How long can the silver-winged maiden evade the Holy Lance Longinus' radiance, fired from the skyfaring vessel with its sails of light?"

A fierce battle raged on the large screen. The girl, transformed into a mythrill bird, desperately manoeuvred against the underworld ship that mirrored her flight path, unleashing a barrage of light slashes. Despite reaching supersonic speeds at maximum, the girl's current flight speed hovered around three hundred kilometres per hour, likely hindered by the warrior clinging to her wing. Magical flight defences and agility barely kept her from direct hits, but how long could she sustain this?

Comments indicating high chip payments scrolled down the screen...

Such distasteful commentary, though I suppose I only feel that way because I'm losing. If someone were to throw me a gold chip or higher, I'm sure I'd change my mind.

Black Raven: Brilliant coordination! Silver to Istorre.

Green Wood: Show us more! Silver from me too.

White Night: Could Rider's ship have achieved dimensional navigation?

War Tactics: Frequency's too high for that. Texture navigation at best.

Red Sun: Watching the Istorres makes me feel at ease. Gold for them.

"You're all too generous! By the way, a ten percent organiser fee applies. Much obliged for the patronage."

Lemina's brow furrowed. The hidden fee despite tax-free assurances stung. Not a single chip had landed in her lap yet.

"But one oddity remains. Why didn't Lancer unleash his Noble Phantasm's True Name in the surprise attack? Perhaps chivalry held him back?"

Sir Percival was a knight of purity and honesty. Given his nature, sometimes called foolish, it was certainly feasible. However, Lemina harboured another possibility, one she firmly believed in!

The large screen displayed the wolven warrior's ferocious attack in full detail. Sinfjötli. That was the name Berserker had called him. This Rider was undeniably him, warrior of Norse legend. Ragnar was right.

Then we still have a chance. We haven't lost a single thing yet.

Even with Rider's formidable Noble Phantasm, unmatched stealth, and mobility, the looming threat of Lancer and the Holy Spear still hung over them. The true battle was yet to come. Renewed determination hardened her resolve.

"The outcome is sealed, Yggdmillennia! You've witnessed our Rider's Noble Phantasm. Escape is futile."

Memel's barked threats were mere empty provocations. Lemina, unfazed, chose to ignore them.

"Why do you keep silent? Can you truly claim to be nobility, a seeker of arcane knowledge, a mage worthy of respect? Reflect on your actions, Yggdmillennia! Apologise to your ancestors who fought in the Great War, bearing the Magic Crest you now sully!"

Ugh, this woman! She's really pushing her luck.

That last one crossed a line. Fine, she wants to bring in the heat? She's gonna get some.

"Shut up, pipsqueak."

"P-Pipsqueak? What did you...?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

"Wha..."

Memel Istorre was speechless, stunned by Lemina's sharp retort. Perhaps she hadn't expected such verbal retaliation given her disadvantage. If Memel were such a well-mannered young lady, she should have stayed in the countryside instead of pawing at a shady prize like the Doubles Subspecies Grail.

But voicing that would be a step too far. So, she turned to her brother Gagam, the Master holding the Command Seals.

"Gagam Istorre, listen closely."

He remained silent. The detection spell had ended, and his appearance had returned to normal. A single, cold glance pierced her—a predatory reptile sizing up its prey.

That was enough. This was a self-imposed curse, not for the siblings, but for herself. Bearing a heartfelt oath to the past family heads who bequeathed their Magic Crests, the entire Eltfromm family, and the founder Darnic who welcomed them under the branch piercing the heavens—as well as the elite of the Golden Millennium Tree who challenged the Clock Tower—she declared,

"This match is mine."

Gagam's response, or rather, the lack thereof, remained unchanged. But defying her anticipation, a sharp smile carved itself onto the corner of his mouth.

"Do your worst, Lemina Eltfromm."

A predator's instinctive lick of the chops. Or perhaps, the thrill of facing a worthy adversary. *Either way, victory will be ours!*

†

[Special Macro Activated]

[Observation Target Shifted / Multiple Views / Oslo Northern Outskirts]

The mythrill bird soared through the sky, a desperate streak of silver fleeing its pursuers. Occasionally, it would erupt in a burst of incredible speed, vanishing momentarily before reappearing with a sonic boom that rattled the air.

However, these efforts were futile. The vessel hunting it was no ordinary ship; it belonged to the underworld, capable of traversing the gap between the mortal realm and the afterlife. The visible distance between them meant nothing. No matter how far the bird fled, the ship would always catch up. It could simply slip into the gap between worlds and reappear right behind its prey.

To make matters worse, a knight stood on the deck. While the cloaked wolver warrior was formidable, this knight posed a far greater threat. He wielded the Holy Lance, its light shimmering as he unleashed a relentless barrage of thrusts, swings, and sweeps of pure energy at the bird. The bird dodged most attacks with a hair's breadth of clearance, deflecting the unavoidable ones with a swirling wind generated around its own body.

"Don't touch the strings! It messes with my control!"

"Sorry, princess, but this thing is a nightmare to ride!"

The silver bird's wings were comprised of countless layers of silver thread, all connected to strings. But no matter how many forms it could take, it was still fundamentally a harp.

"Into the forest!"

With a cry, the girl who had fused with the mythrill bird dipped low towards the ground. Even in the suburbs, houses and buildings dotted the landscape. Flying so low was a clear violation of the Doubles Grail War rules, but their Master didn't need to remind them of that.

The girl targeted a nearby coniferous forest. Here, there were no signs of human presence. Perhaps the dense trees and obstacles could offer some cover. However, against the underworld ship, such tactics were meaningless. In fact, it was only the mythrill bird that needed to worry about navigating the trees, a fact that both the girl and the Viking warrior were unaware of. Additionally, the wolver warrior, the captain of the underworld ship, possessed far superior riding skills compared to the girl. Their high-speed flight through the gaps in the forest only served to narrow the distance between them.

"Give it up..."

Fleeing was no longer an option.

"...You will never escape our sight."

The Holy Lance unleashed a flurry of attacks, clashing directly with the mythrill bird in a fierce exchange. These weren't the same slashes of light the knight had used earlier, he was now striking with the spearhead itself!

Even while mounted, each blow carried immense weight. While pure speed could have allowed the warrior's axe to shatter the spear, it was this very weight that gave the spear its edge. It deflected the axe and tore into the warrior's steel-like arms, delivering deadly thrusts that threatened to pierce his heart and reach the Spirit Core beyond.

"Ughh!"

The warrior gritted his teeth, struggling against the overwhelming force. In truth, he barely held on, clinging precariously to one of the mythrill bird's wings. But his spirit remained unbroken. Despite his mounting injuries, he managed to parry the knight's attacks with impressive focus, just barely avoiding the fatal blows aimed at his Spirit Core.

"Ha! You're hella strong, Sir Percival!"

"You're a worthy foe yourself."

Unseen eyes, concealed amidst the towering trees that fringed the shores of Lake Maridalsvann, watched over the battle as it unfolded. One observer utilised the supernatural perception of a Heroic Spirit, while the other employed freely wielded clairvoyance. These two Servants were contracted to the second Master, Joanne Merethul.

"Hihihihihi! Look at this, Assassin," a voice cackled.

"You don't have to tell me," Assassin replied, a white death mask obscuring her face. Her long, braided hair wrapped around her body, and her skin was as smooth as shadows. Numerous blades adorned her person.

The masked woman's gaze stayed fixated on the battlefield. She noted the knight's prowess and the unmistakable radiant glow emanating from his Holy Lance.

"A Knight of the Round Table," she mused. "The valiant wielder of the Holy Lance, Percival. A hero worthy of the title indeed."

"Certainly. An absolute monster, no doubt about it. And yet, that young lad is holding his own quite well. Hihi, quite the spirited fellow," her companion added, her long, gnarled staff clutched in her hand, appearing as an old woman, an enchantress, and a young girl all at once. Her left leg had been replaced by a magical tool, and a towering shadow with an eerie glow trailed behind her. Her gaze remained firmly fixed on the warrior's battle.



"Hmm..." the masked woman murmured, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

Her high regard of his abilities was no surprise. Sir Percival was, after all, one of the knights who graced King Arthur's Round Table. But the forest apparition who currently resembled an old crone seemed more captivated by Berserker, even while acknowledging the knight's monstrous strength.

"No wonder Lešij got so excited," she cackled. "Look at him! That's no mere record of a dead man carved into the Throne. Hihihihihihihhi! Hyahyahyahyaha!"

"Caster?" Assassin questioned.

What did this apparition find so hilarious? A shiver snaked down her spine as she unconsciously gulped in anticipation.

"How could I not be entertained?! This is wonderful! By the father of victory, the wolf of war, and the father of armies, this is simply sublime! That Odin really knows how to keep things interesting! Or perhaps this is the work of those goddesses of fate, the Norns?! Now that they've been thoroughly assimilated into the world, have they decided to torment these human-infested lands?! Hihihihihihihhi!"

After a long fit of laughter, she adopted a calmer tone, her voice barely a whisper.

"Watch closely, my lovely Assassin," she murmured. "That, my dear, is what a true warrior looks like."

†

A true Viking. Despite the odds overwhelmingly stacked against him, his joy in battle was undeniable. Sir Percival, Knight of the Holy Lance, observed this with a keen eye.

He pondered if Berserker's emotions had only begun to leak out because of his unfavourable position. He seemed to be forcing a state of calm upon himself, as evidenced by his composure during their clash on the Oslo City Hall rooftop. Yet, with each spurt of blood from the Holy Lance's strikes, the Viking's true feelings toward combat and death spilled forth.

Was this the madness that drove them to seek death in the wake of carnage? No, for those who worshipped the ruler of the battlefield as supreme, it was one who found pain in battle who was truly mad. Sir Percival silently concluded this.

The wild Norse warrior. He was the real deal. This much was clear from their brutal exchanges of spear and axe blows.

But an absolute difference lay in their mounts. The mythrill wings, a magnificent Noble Phantasm and its wielder, paled in comparison to the master of the underworld ship.

What a pity. To be defeated because of a disparity in our mounts. Perhaps two, at most three exchanges remain.

By the time they crossed arms again, the iron-haired warrior would surely understand his impending demise—with his heart and the silver maiden's Spirit Core pierced, their duel would come to an end.

"Now, then..." the knight thought.

It was time to fell them once and for all.

As he raised the Holy Lance for their final encounter, the harp dipped low, and the surrounding magical energy shifted. In quick succession, a blast of wind and azure flames erupted from the girl's core, a combination of Mana Burst and Form Change. The harp, exhibiting its first burst of acceleration, rocketed away from the underworld ship at even greater supersonic speeds.

"Incredible. They vanished in an instant, without even destroying a single tree," the knight observed.

"She won't last long. That kind of power drain will deplete her mana rapidly," the wolver warrior muttered.

"Can you sense magical energy?" inquired the knight.

"Runes aren't my forte," admitted the wolver warrior.

"This calls for Master," the knight remarked.

Master Gagam Istorre's 'eye' remained fixed on the Norse warrior.

The response was swift: "The enemy is in the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology."

Ironically, they were hiding in the same standby point where Rule X had been activated, albeit at a different elevation. Unlike them, the knight and wolver warrior had waited outside on the rooftop; meanwhile, the other two Servants hid inside the museum, choosing an empty spot as their refuge. Running away was no longer in the cards.

Their Master's 'eye' was extremely precise. The wolver warrior, armed with precise coordinates, scanned the cloudy sky. He seemed to see something despite the lack of stars and moon.

"Rider..."

"Don't say it. I am already bound by a Command Seal. Disobeying Master's orders is impossible."

"Then let us pray for a miracle. The Lord shall watch over us."

"...Hmph. Your god, yes. A kind one, it seems."

The knight didn't nod, but neither did he shake his head. This barbarity would not only wound the wolver warrior's secret feelings but also mercilessly destroy the museum, a monument to human history and civilization. A pang of guilt stabbed at his heart. This action would stain his conscience before God.

Even so, the knight wielded his spear. Not as a naive devotee of justice, but as a knight solely devoted to his Master. Perhaps the only comfort was the deserted museum. Their Master's 'eye' detected no other human presence beside the two hidden Servants.

"A shame," he said.

"No, it's all right. Do it," replied the wolver warrior.

As the words left his lips, the surrounding coniferous forest vanished. Sewing through the gaps in the world's surface, the underworld ship positioned itself ten thousand metres above the designated coordinates.

High above the obscuring clouds, a silent expanse glittered beneath a radiant moon, distant stars peeking through.

Responding to the wolver warrior's resolve, Sir Percival raised his Holy Lance Longinus, the spear said to have pierced the Saviour and received his blood. A

different one to that which shined at the ends of the world. The golden light around its tip surged with an explosive concentration of magical energy.

"May a miracle descend upon this land," Sir Percival prayed. "Holy Lance, dual restraints rescinded. Begin countdown."

With his prayer, the spear blazed with renewed brilliance.

The magical restraints imposed under the names of the two knights associated with the Holy Lance, Sir Galahad of the Grail and Sir Balin, were lifted, unleashing the spear's suppressed power. The tip transformed into a colossal blade of light, its spiralling radiance rivalling the sun.

Radiant Lance of Fate

"Longinus Count Zero!"

Light erupted. A band of light emanated from the colossal blade, tearing a five-metre hole through the overcast sky. The blinding beam descended upon the slumbering museum below, targeting the coordinates where the warrior and girl desperately tried to conceal themselves.

"...Magnificent."

"I shall descend to confirm their status. Please remain on standby here."

Stepping off the edge of the underworld ship without hesitation, the spear-wielding knight plunged towards the museum where he had created a gaping hole.

From the moment he began his descent at a speed of two hundred kilometres per hour, powered by magical propulsion, Percival could not believe his senses. *No, it couldn't be...* But the reality before him was undeniable. A miracle had occurred. They were still alive. He sensed the unmistakable presence of two Spirit Cores, Heroic Spirits whose energy signatures intertwined, powerful and unfaltering.

Their magical signatures, potent and distinct, were like scents he'd become familiar with during this manifestation. Yet, due to the sheer density, he couldn't discern their exact proximity. The potent auras intermingled, making it impossible to tell if they were united or at a distance.

Then let me affirm it once more. If they have truly brought forth a miracle, my spear can do naught to claim their lives!

"Harggh!"

With a guttural cry, he unleashed a flash of the Holy Lance, aiming and firing while still in descent! Without invoking its True Name, he unleashed a powerful blow upon the rubble below. Chunks of debris shattered, eliciting a deafening roar, dust billowing upwards. Then, just a half-breath later...

Sir Percival himself descended with a thunderous thud, slamming the tip of the Holy Lance into the exact same spot where the light had pierced just before. The rubble was pulverised even further, revealing fresh blood.

"Heh, heh... You missed, Lancer."

There was a deep resistance. The pursuing spear had undoubtedly pierced the figure of the Viking. Even after enduring the full power of the Holy Lance unleashed with its True Name, and two consecutive attacks in quick succession... his Saint Graph remained intact.

But why? A Viking such as yourself would never bequeath your own fate to a miracle!

"!"

A gasp of astonishment escaped the knight's lips. He grasped the situation with just a single glance. The shimmering fabric of the tunic worn by the warrior beneath his leather jacket, it was...

"A mythril garment!"

"Correct..."

A conceptual defence powerful enough to withstand the unleashed Holy Lance, even with its dual restraints rescinded! A protective Noble Phantasm with limited activations, yet boasting immense power.

The Norse legends whispered of Valkyries weaving tunics that granted the wearer invulnerability. Crafted beyond human capabilities, it was said to be a gift from Aslaug, the last Valkyrie, who was born of a dragon-slaying hero and another Valkyrie. The legends of Scandinavia dictated that in a time past the Age of Gods, she bequeathed these garments to the Viking king who was also her spouse. Then this warrior's True Name was...

"Ragnar Lodbrok!" the knight proclaimed.

"Hell yeah!"

The warrior Ragnar glared at the knight, spitting blood. There was something else behind him. The figure of a girl with a mythrill bow, peeking out from behind the large warrior's imposing form.

So he braved all of my attacks himself to preserve Archer.

Splendid, Berserker Ragnar!

A magical arrow aimed at the Spirit Core was surely imminent. The only option left to him was to counter with the Holy Lance.

But no matter how much he tightened his grip on the spear, the weapon wouldn't budge. Lodged deep within Ragnar's abdomen, the spear's tip was held fast, as if gripped by a colossal beast's vice. The Viking's muscles, transformed into steel by his unwavering will and determination, refused to yield the Holy Lance!

"Not yet!" the knight roared.

His only recourse was to block the Valkyrie's arrow with the large shield mounted on his pauldron. As the knight braced himself... a flicker of flame ignited deep within the warrior's eyes.

"I've got him, boss!"

"!"

So that's it. They were never aiming for me in the first place!

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Oslo Opera House]

"Got it!" Lemina Eltfromm exclaimed, her voice echoing across the stage with unbridled enthusiasm.

She was fully aware that telepathy didn't require vocalisation, but the adrenaline of the moment had gotten the better of her. No matter. This was where she drew the line.

Raising her right hand high, she focused her consciousness and magical energy into a Command Seal.

"Archer! Leap!"

The Command Seal was activated, triggering the instantaneous teleportation of her contracted Heroic Spirit. The target location was ten thousand metres above the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology. However, she made a slight adjustment, shifting the position fifteen metres to the west.

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / The skies above the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology]

The moon was in plain sight. The aurora borealis, like a celestial curtain, had descended unnoticed, framing a crescent moon hanging in the vast expanse.

Then, a vision materialised ten thousand metres above the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, about fifteen metres left of Rider Sinfjötli's coordinates. The silver maiden stood poised with a colossal mythrill bow, magical arrow knocked and drawn back. An instantaneous arrival, a high-speed spatial translocation akin to teleportation, one of the three miracles wrought by Command Seals, bundles of dense magical energy.

"_____"

The hulking figure of the wolverine warrior, Sinfjötli, remained with his back exposed. The target was the heart, the very core of the Saint Graph. This organ, conceptually intimate to the Spirit Core, represented the life force of a Heroic Spirit. Even if his form was a temporary vessel woven from ether, a pierced heart would spell his demise.

With the girl's arrow poised for release, seemingly simultaneous with her arrival, evasion or defence seemed impossible. This pseudo-transfer, fueled by a

Command Seal, was an astonishing power that transcended the skills of even the most seasoned warriors.

The arrow, a shimmering beacon of azure light, would effortlessly slay a Heroic Spirit when it pierced their heart. At least, an ordinary one.

But Sinfjötli, a true warrior of Norse legend, was no ordinary foe. His instincts, honed to razor sharpness, allowed him to react reflexively, even to threats from his blind spot. He possessed the lethal capability to pierce the girl's head, adorned with silver hair that mirrored her mother's, with a single strike of his lethal claw. Or, in a swift leap from the ship, his wolverine maw could crush her slender neck in a heartbeat. Such feats were effortless for Sinfjötli.

No matter how close the transfer was to the realm of magic, her safety wasn't guaranteed. Anyone who dared enter Sinfjötli's meticulously maintained zone of reflexive defence, stretched to the maximum, would face a merciless end.

Perhaps, a genius swordsman or spearman wielding a peerless technique might be able to deliver a decisive blow by exceeding his explosive reflexes. Yet, while the silver girl possessed considerable combat prowess, her technique hadn't yet reached the pinnacle of mastery.

With a growl, Sinfjötli's colossal arms tensed. The claws were aimed at the girl behind him as he turned around. As he pivoted, the razor-sharp claws on his hands extended with explosive force, aimed directly at the unsuspecting girl behind him. In this inescapable scenario, the only fate that awaited the silver girl was a swift demise with her bow still drawn.

Or at least, that's how it should have been.

But as Sinfjötli's sharp wolf eyes met the girl's azure gaze, a flicker of recognition ignited within him.

Ah, that cherished visage! How could I forget those sparkling azure eyes, that silver hair like a sea of stars!

Upon recognizing the silver girl's face, the wolverine warrior's instinctive reaction wasn't to strike her down. Instead...

"Aslaug."

A gentle gaze, accompanied by a sighing murmur of her name. The deadly extension of his claws halted mid-motion.

He couldn't kill her.

It was for this reason Sinfjötli had opposed Lancer's Holy Spear being fired when Berserker and the girl were first discovered with Gagam's Spiritual Evocation. Taking her life was unthinkable. He simply couldn't do it. He hadn't come to this world to witness her demise.

Though powerless to prevent the Holy Lance's descent, he held faith in her conceptual defence for survival. The Viking brat was a loathsome enemy, but as long as nothing slipped past his watchful eye, he would never allow her to be harmed, even if it meant expending all of his defensive Noble Phantasm.

Indeed, she was still alive. Still breathing.

My love, beloved child of our clan. I have come to truly liberate you, the crystal of love that we cherish!

"Beautiful light of silver. Live on, my..."

His words were abruptly cut short. Before he could complete his declaration, a supersonic blow struck him with devastating force. The magical arrow pierced Sinfjötli's chest with unerring accuracy. Aimed with cold precision, it shattered his heart and deeply impaled the Spirit Core nestled within the Saint Graph.

In his final moments, what sight was reflected within his wolveren eyes? The luminous moon? Or perhaps, the azure eyes of the girl, mirroring the colour of the arrow that now pierced his very being?



†

"Seriously," the girl muttered, a slight puff to her cheeks betraying a hint of irritation. "Why is everyone just casually throwing around my True Name?"

In an instant, the wolf-headed man's Saint Graph shattered into countless fragments, vanishing from the mortal realm without a trace. The underworld vessel met a similar fate, disintegrating into particles of dust that scattered into the air.

Under the moonlit sky, only the solitary figure of the last Valkyrie remained.

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Oslo Opera House]

"...throwing around my True Name."

A lone voice echoed through the vast hall, quickly drowned out by a thunderous roar of applause. One might mistake it for a crowd of thousands, but that was far from the truth.

These mages, known for their old-fashioned ways, wouldn't dream of cooperating with the organisers for such a modern spectacle. Most of the applause undoubtedly came from familiars and homunculi planted by the organisers, their cheers punctuated by claps.

"Impossible...!" Memel stumbled back.

"Fall back, Percival. We need to regroup," Gagam commanded, his voice betraying his confusion despite his outwardly calm demeanour. Flustered, he seemed to have completely forgotten about Lemina's presence.

A booming voice resonated through the hall: "Gagam Istorre's application of Rule X has now been lifted! Let us erupt in thunderous applause for Lemina

Eltfromm, the courageous challenger who faced the formidable duo of Lancer and Rider, and has emerged victorious against the latter!"

Lemina exhaled amidst the eruption of cheers and applause. Despite the excitement, she realised she was drenched in sweat. Perhaps the tension of the battle was finally catching up to her. Once she became aware, sweat continued to pour out in waves.

Ugh, it's hot. So hot! That was way too close for comfort!

"That's one down," she mumbled to herself, flapping her collar to catch a breeze.

This victory wasn't a fluke. From the beginning, she had been confident in their ability to defeat Rider Sinfjötli.

Lemina had laid out a meticulous plan. While they made it appear as if they desired an all-out confrontation with Sir Percival as their primary target, in reality, their focus was solely on Rider.

The data sent by Caules on Rider Sinfjötli's combat abilities made it clear that Archer and Berserker stood no chance against the combined might of both heroes. The unshakable truth was that they had no way of defeating them as a duo. So, their strategy hinged on separating this formidable pair. The key question was whether Lancer would unleash his Noble Phantasm's True Name.

Based on information from the previous two Subspecies Holy Grail Wars, Lancer wouldn't consider an enemy defeated unless their Spirit Core was destroyed, even if he'd already invoked its True Name. If the enemy was barely clinging to life, he would personally finish them off at close range.

This might be a sign of respect for his opponent, but it presented an opportunity. While Lancer delivered the final blow, Rider would remain airborne with his Noble Phantasm active. Of course, he wouldn't stay put for long. They needed to launch their attack on him before he could escape.

Earlier in the waiting room, Lemina had addressed Berserker.

"I doubt Rider will drop his guard for even the slightest moment. How do we break through his defences?"

Berserker replied, his face and voice devoid of emotion, "Send the princess, and let her kill him."

He spoke in a monotone voice, both free from doubt or urgency and devoid of any inflection. He had been presenting himself as a cheerful man prior, but he now resembled a cold blade. She tried to grasp the mental state that led him to this conclusion, but it was in vain. There was nothing. Nothing at all.

"Your wife, right? Her?" Lemina stammered.

"Yeah."

"You kept talking about how precious she is to you. Weren't you calling her your revered princess and the like?"

"Aslaug is my most revered princess. She is everything to me. What of it?"

Lemina floundered. "Um..."

"What's the matter, Boss? Don't you want to win?" Berserker challenged.

"!"

A sudden realisation struck her. *Right, this is Ragnar Lodbrok. A warrior from a world where survival hinged on killing others.*

She thought she had understood on an intellectual level, but the reality was far harsher. Despite her training and ingrained calmness in the face of violence and death, Lemina now understood the vast gulf between her and a true Viking, a literal embodiment of war and death. He wouldn't hesitate to use even his beloved wife as a weapon. And he did so without a flicker of a doubt.

"I can't do it," Ragnar said flatly. "I'd be torn to pieces in an instant if I tried to attack him from a blind spot."

"You're certain that Archer can win. That's what you're saying, right?" Lemina pressed.

"Yeah."

"What's your basis?"

"Rider's True Name is Sinfjötli. I could tell by his scent."

"Sinfjötli? You mean..."

"Yeah. Her uncle."

The large screen blazed with a slow-motion replay of the decisive moment. Upon closer inspection, it seemed Rider hesitated ever so slightly when his gaze met Aslaug's.

Was Percival's aversion to such a dishonourable tactic the reason the Holy Lance remained undrawn during the initial surprise attack, or was it Rider's own choice? The answer would likely remain a mystery.

A faint murmur escaped Rider's lips on the screen, but the distance rendered it unintelligible. Perhaps a plea for her to stop? Berserker, after all, had spoken of Sinfjötli's deep affection for his niece.

This particular detail struck Lemina as peculiar. Legend painted Sinfjötli, the elder brother of Sigurd the Dragonslayer, Aslaug's father, as deceased before his birth. As a Heroic Spirit, he might possess knowledge of his niece's existence, but the timeline wouldn't allow for a genuine bond of affection to develop. Yet, would such a renowned warrior resort to deception?

The fact remained: their strategy had been successful. Rider, true to Ragnar's words, held back from attacking the silver maiden. They had emerged victorious.

"....."

A stunning reversal, a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. This should have been a moment of unbridled joy, shouldn't it? Yet, something gnawed at her inside, a bitter aftertaste.

†

[Macro Activated / Observation Target Shifted / Inside the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology]

Moonlight and starlight bathed the landscape, the oppressive clouds that had shrouded the night vanishing without a trace.

Ragnar Lodbrok found himself in a precarious situation, buried beneath the debris at the bottom of the gaping wound torn into the Museum of Science and Technology by the Holy Lance.

Lancer Percival had already vanished. Following an unspoken command from his Master, he had departed swiftly and silently, leaving Ragnar with no one strong enough to extricate him from the wreckage.

He yearned to escape on his own, but his body refused to obey. The protective mythril tunic had preserved his life by a hair, but the combined assault of the Holy Lance's power and the final blow left him in a state where even blinking felt like a monumental effort. Even drawing a breath was a laborious task.

Suddenly, the music from his iPod nano, wirelessly connected to his earbuds, pierced his ears. The song playing was *'This Fffire'* by Franz Ferdinand, an anthem about consuming a city in flames.

"Surtr's song, perhaps," he murmured with closed eyes. "A fitting one for me."

And then, a faint presence descended. He opened his eyes to behold a figure radiating heavenly brilliance. It exuded a power entirely different from the overwhelming magical energy of the Holy Lance. Her cascading silver hair swaying, the girl who had descended through the gaping hole was none other than Aslaug.

"The wolf Rider is slain."

"So it seems."

"Are you going to die too?"

"That depends on your mercy, Princess."

Aslaug's azure eyes twinkled. "...Your demise would be inconvenient. I require the Subspecies Grail, and achieving that alone would be a difficult feat."

The last Valkyrie, his beloved, a soul of such nobility, her voice barely above a murmur. Ragnar offered a curt nod.

"Then pull me up from this mess. And give me a healing rune too."

"Pick one."

"I want both."

"Oh, come on."

With a sigh of exasperation at the ever-demanding Viking, she extended her hand towards him...

Beyond her, visible through the gaping hole in the museum, two ravens soared against the backdrop of the starry sky.

My beloved princess. I swear I will save you. With my own two hands.

Interlude I

Interlude I

[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Upstream / Recreating Observation / Ninth Century]

[Norway / Ragnar's Abode]

The man slumbered on his back, sprawled atop a plush rug fashioned from the hide of some colossal beast.

The building itself felt grander than a typical dwelling, leaving Aslaug unsure if this was indeed the bedroom. Yet, since the home's imposing master lay peacefully here, it seemed the most logical conclusion.

He slept soundly, his thick physique clad only in a tunic and undergarments, a picture of vulnerability.

A guttural snore occasionally escaped his lips. Aslaug, having heard from Old Man Heimir about such slumbering peculiarities, wasn't startled. Except, that was actually a lie. Initially, she was so bewildered she leapt ten centimetres straight up while perched on the fur, attempting to decipher the unexpected warmth.

Having discarded her mythril and fishing net attire for a lighter cloth garment found within the house, her jump was considerably more dramatic.

Such a carefree expression, even in sleep. Don't frighten me so abruptly, you Viking.

Her gaze fixated on him, resolute in her determination to decipher this enigmatic man. A few seconds melted away swiftly. Ten minutes later, a few observations began to coalesce.

His hair, short and iron-hued, held a surprising softness upon closer inspection. The scars adorning him, sprawled over his entire body, not just his face. His beard, braided in three sections, was more meticulous than she initially perceived. And his slack and slovenly slumbering face, was indeed slack and slovenly.

"...Ragnar Lodbrok," she murmured unconsciously.

Just who is this man?

He said he was a Viking, but that doesn't tell me much.

She prodded his cheek firmly with her fingertips. It was hard. She pressed harder and harder, expecting him to wake in pain. But her fingers were the one that hurt instead.

No hint of awakening disturbed his slumber. Perhaps the near day-long game of 'Fox and Goose' with the troll had utterly drained both his stamina and magical energy.



Exhausted, he'd drained even the power that fuelled his very life. Yet, in the pitfall, he had imbued his final attack with magical energy. Violent, wasteful, and far from the elegance of Aslaug's Primordial Runes, but undeniably effective.

Gratitude muted any complaints that might have formed. However, his utter obliviousness to his own magical energy troubled her.

And the skáld? Elusive as a raven, he remained an enigma.

"Dog, are you there?" she called out.

In her mind, dogs were the ideal companions.

No answer. Likely outside, then.

A fleeting desire to pet him passed, but she shrugged it off. Her attention returned to the slumbering man. There was something strangely familiar about his sleeping posture...

A brief observation, two seconds at most, confirmed her suspicion.

Oh. He's just like a little child.

The same feeling stirred within her as when he'd smiled.

Aslaug recalled her initial surprise at the building's sheer size. The hulking man, his grin both proud and sheepish, had declared, "Consider it your home. Ours, in fact!"

"Hmm," she'd replied noncommittally.

Bragging, perhaps?

Yet, his embarrassment seemed to outweigh any pride.

Indeed, the structure was vast for a dwelling.

About two hours after slaying the troll, Aslaug, riding the horse left for her by the hulking man and the skáld at a house near the forest's edge, arrived at an unfamiliar village. Unsure of which building was theirs, she was led to this one, on the outskirts rather than the centre.

Massive. One person could never manage such a place. A longhouse, apparently—a dwelling for a chieftain or king, their family, and a space for governing, hosting feasts, and gathering subordinates.

The high ceiling mirrored the building's immense exterior. Unlike the cramped seaside inn, this place could comfortably house a wolf indoors.

"Ragnar isn't the chieftain," the skáld explained, "so it's smaller than a true longhouse. But since he leads the raids, and considering we don't have a real longhouse here anyway, the chieftain granted him special permission to be the village representative."

"Bragi, you don't need to explain that."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Boasting without reason loses face."

"Nonsense! What say you, Aslaug?"

"I don't care."

Her indifference was genuine. The skáld's expression contorted, while the hulking man nodded knowingly.

"Ah, right. Should I tell the couple at the inn...?"

"Mmm."

"...that Kráka's gone?"

"Yep. Go ahead."

Her voice held no hesitation. The seaside inn held no sentimental attachment for her. In fact, on reflection, the couple hadn't treated her well at all. Though she wasn't the main object of their ire, they'd disparaged Old Man Heimir on countless occasions. A touch of retribution wouldn't be entirely out of line.

The only thing she might miss, perhaps, was the view of the fjord. She thought this as she looked into Ragnar's eyes, which mirrored the same shade.

"Aslaug," he rumbled.

Did she give him the wrong impression? She'd merely been admiring his eyes, nothing more.

As if readying himself for combat, he bent his knees slightly and assumed a stance.

"Will you live with me?" he asked.

Scratching his cheek, he glanced around the empty interior of the house. A lone deer antler hung on the wall. Aslaug couldn't fathom any connection between

herself and a deer, so she tilted her head in confusion, trying to recall his earlier question.

He asked if she would live here.

"Yep," she replied.

"So that means you'll be my wife?"

"That's a separate matter," she interjected before his excitement could take hold.

A moment of stunned silence followed.

Clearing his throat, he mumbled, "A separate matter, I see."

"Yep."

"...Well, if you say so."

He nodded vigorously, a glimmer of understanding dawning on his face. Then, with that same unguarded smile, he boomed, "Well, it seems that strange voice's trials aren't over yet!"

He'd maintained a facade of cheerfulness until then. Afterward, fatigue and drowsiness swept over him like a tidal wave. Despite his valiant attempt at conversation, punctuated by three drowsy nods, he finally succumbed to sleep, sprawled on his back across the bedspread.

That's right. Seeing the state of his clothes—caked in mud from the pit and stained with troll blood—Aslaug knew they wouldn't offer him much comfort in sleep. She set about removing them. It was a cumbersome task, leaving her with a simmering frustration.

What price could she exact for such a service?

If she ever encountered her wolf-headed uncle again, she'd seek his counsel. But for now, the wolveren warrior was absent from the longhouse. He had vanished before they even emerged from the forest, leaving only a promise to watch over her from afar and a kind gaze that mirrored Old Man Heimir's.

Aslaug peered out the longhouse entrance, searching for him in vain. Where, exactly, was his watchful vigil taking place?

"My... princess..."

"Hm?"

"As...l...aug."

"Yes?"

Had he called her name? No, just a murmur lost in sleep.

She prodded his cheek again, only to be rewarded with the same jolt of pain in her finger.

Just who is this man? When I'm with him, the world around me takes a different form. I've witnessed wonders I never could have imagined if I remained at the inn.

The near-death encounter with the troll couldn't erase the thrill of the unknown. It was far preferable to the stifling routine without Old Man Heimir. Never again, she vowed, would those walls confine her. A tentative decision bloomed within her: she would stay with the large Viking, at least for now. Aslaug's gaze lingered on his careless, sleeping face as she thought so.

†

As dusk settled, the hulking man stirred awake—a full day later. Having fought relentlessly, he'd slept for nearly as long. Aslaug saw this as a fair trade and held no complaints.

Nothing, truly. No need for words.

As his figure emerged from the longhouse, rubbing sleep from bleary eyes, Aslaug waved him over.

A fire crackled nearby, ready to smoke the deer they'd received from the villagers. Her gesture was a silent summons: *Your turn to contribute.*

A low growl rumbled from the wolf at her feet. Then... in a surprisingly serious tone, the massive Viking called out her name: "Aslaug."

Aslaug sensed an unspoken warning, perhaps about a lurking danger, and tilted her head in confusion. A bear or troll might have warranted such concern, but the situation was calm.

Beside her sat the skáld, recently returned from his meeting with the innkeepers. A new voice joined them.

"Been a while, Ragnar," a woman greeted.

She possessed the alluring sturdiness of a doe, a warrior proudly bearing the marks of sun and battle on her scarred skin. Her name was Lagertha. Nimble and strong, with small metal shields strapped to her arms, her strength was undeniable. Aslaug instinctively understood her capabilities.

The skáld had spoken of Lagertha's fame, a warrior whose name echoed far and wide, rivalling the legendary Amazons of Greece. No exaggeration, Aslaug thought. This woman was formidable.



Yet, a sense of warmth also emanated from her. While Aslaug remained cautiously reserved, Lagertha offered a helping hand with butchering the deer as she shared songs and fairytales from distant lands. Each tale was captivating, but Aslaug found herself particularly drawn to the one about a girl who sicced a bear on her fiancé.

"So where did you find such a fine princess?" Lagertha asked.

"Beats me," he replied, keeping his gaze fixed on her.

Bragi chuckled. "Right, where was I, Lagertha? This lady here, she's a real princess, you know. Shocked?"

"Right, right. Bragi, always one for theatrics, isn't he, Ragnar?"

Lagertha, with a graceful shrug, turned to Aslaug. "By the way, little lady, I hadn't gotten your name yet. What is it?"

"Uh..."

She had only listened and hardly spoken a word herself. It would be rude not to introduce herself. Aslaug wondered if she should proudly announce her lineage or simply state her name. Before she could decide...

"...!"

A flash of steel erupted, accompanied by the woman's fierce cry. A long sword, hidden beneath her cloak, whipped out in a blur. Only when the entire sequence of movements had ended did she comprehend it fully.

The steel blade, drawn straight from its leather scabbard and swung in a single motion, pointed directly at the giant's jugular vein. The slightest twitch would send blood spraying. Ragnar, reacting on instinct, drew his dagger, but Lagertha's shield held his thrust firm.

At first glance, it appeared the woman had launched a surprise attack. The reason remained unclear, but her dominance was undeniable. Yet, tension shadowed her determined expression.

"Huh?"

It took a moment to register the spearhead pressed against Lagertha's neck. Mythril, cool and heavy, its handle grasped in Aslaug's own hand. A flicker of

concern crossed the wolf's eyes as it darted its gaze between the female warrior and Aslaug.

Huh? Me? I was supposed to be speechless, stunned.

But my body reacted on its own. Why?

"Well, well! The two of you are already in perfect sync, I see."

"S-Sorry."

She hastily retracted the spear. It seemed she'd unconsciously transformed her grand harp, shrunk into her palm, into a weapon once more. Spear, bow... she needed to be careful. It'd be a disaster if she caused another incident like this in her drowsy stupor.

"No harm done. Just a little nudge for our slumbering fool here. I didn't mean to startle you, young lady."

The hulking man grumbled, his eyes narrowed. "Just pure evil, that's what it was."

"Ahaha. Anyway, what's your name, young lady?"

"Aslaug."

She answered the question obediently.

A glint of admiration in her eyes, Lagertha replied, "That's a nice name. Haha, I liked you already when you were listening along, but I like you even more now! The name's Lagertha. Skjaldmær, and this fellow's former woman."

Dinner arrived abruptly. Ragnar's stomach, silenced by the threat of a blade, rumbled mightily. The skáld, catching the sound, chuckled and quipped about a monstrous worm residing within. He even began a song, weaving the rising smoke from the village fires and the approaching laughter into a melody of merriment.

The deer lay prepared. The smoked and salted cuts could wait, but the roasted meat was the centerpiece of the feast. Aslaug insisted on using every bit, so the remaining raw meat would be turned into soup. As a result, a bounty of food graced the long table in the longhouse, accompanied by many barrels of ale.

The skáld, unlike his companions, showed little interest in the drink. The others, however, were already partaking with gusto. Ragnar, in particular, seemed to be enjoying the ale a little too much. Was it just her imagination?

"Excellent work, cooks!" the skáld offered, his voice betraying a lack of confidence in his own culinary skills. The rabbit was cooked perfectly.

"Good food is essential, even on campaign," the large man declared, downing his seventh cup.

"This goblet is silver, isn't it? A treasure for sure," the skjaldmær remarked, eyeing her metal cup.

"Loot from a raid," Ragnar explained with his eighth cup. "Could be sold, but a cup is a cup."

"More food, dog?"

Aslaug offered the wolf, who happily devoured the meaty bone with a woof.

Despite the focus on ale, the venison dishes were a hit. Aslaug's toiling at the inn proved valuable. While fish was more common in the region, the proximity of the forest allowed for meat dishes as well. The soup vanished quickly, the roasted meat became a collection of bones, and half the smoked and salted cuts were devoured. Ragnar and Lagertha, particularly adept, used their large knives to expertly scrape the last morsels from the bones.

"A fine cook for such a young woman," Ragnar complimented on his tenth cup.

"Indeed! A song for the princess!" The skáld declared, grabbing his instrument.

Hmph. Aslaug puffed out her chest in satisfaction. It wasn't a bad feeling. Now that her stomach was settled, the time was right for her question.

"By the way..."

"Hmm?" Ragnar responded, halfway through his thirteenth cup.

"What's a skjaldmær?"

"Ah, well... a skjaldmær," he began, gulping down his fourteenth, "is a woman who does battle. It isn't all that rare for a woman to pick up an axe to defend her

village, but those who take part in raids are an exception. A skjaldmær is one who embraces that warrior path."

The skáld, his voice imbued with rhythm as he strummed his instrument, continued, "A title shared by the Valkyries who soared through the sky during the Age of Gods."

Lagertha, a proud smile gracing her lips, raised her goblet. "A glorious name, a source of pride."

"I see," Aslaug murmured, a flicker of gratification crossing her features. It pleased her that the other name for the Valkyries held such honour. This, too, was a revelation for Aslaug. Old Man Heimir had never spoken of such a thing.



Curiosity piqued, Aslaug ventured another question. With a nonchalant nod, she inquired, "So what does 'former woman' mean?"

"!"

A geyser of ale erupted from the giant's mouth as he attempted a hearty swig of his sixteenth cup. It was reminiscent of a whale breaching the surface of the sea and spraying seawater, as if using a water rune. Face and beard now thoroughly soaked, Ragnar addressed Aslaug directly, his expression unusually serious.

"Aslaug," he began.

"What?"

"Lagertha..." He paused, then continued, "...was my second wife."

"Second..."

"Death claimed my first."

Claimed by death... That mention brought a new, unreadable expression to Ragnar's face. Aslaug couldn't decipher its meaning, so she filed it away in her memory for now.

She attempted to respond, but to her surprise, words failed her. Nothing came out. Hm... What was this knot of emotions churning within her? Was it the hulking man himself, or something deeper, a confusion of her own feelings? Perhaps the lingering scent of ale was muddling her thoughts.

"Perhaps I should fill you in. That's me we're talking about, after all," Lagertha interjected, her voice familiar and comforting. Hers was an alluring tone, akin to a fireside storyteller, weaving tales with inflections and emotions that mirrored the narrative.

According to her, marriage held no initial appeal. To deter suitors, she presented them with absurd challenges. Only one man, the formidable warrior Ragnar, conquered them all. Though she became his wife, her true desire lay in the path of a *skjaldmær*, not a housewife. And so, she embarked on a journey to distant lands beyond the horizon. She then fell in love with the chieftain of a certain clan on her journey and had her second marriage.

"...Second marriage?"

"Indeed. But he proved to be a weakling, so I left him."

"Skjaldmær Lagertha, who left two men behind and now leads her own clan..."
The skáld, inspired, launched into an impromptu poem.

Chieftain, head—these titles implied strength, and even with her limited knowledge of the era, Aslaug understood this much. She'd heard similar things from the inn patrons and perhaps even from Old Man Heimir.

"You're the chieftain, Lagertha?"

"That's right. And a rather busy one, at that," Lagertha replied firmly. "Don't fret, young lady. There's nothing between us."

Aslaug nodded, accepting the explanation.

"I understand."

"!"

A scraping sound startled them. Ragnar, clearly inebriated, was struggling not to fall out of his chair.

"You drink too much, Ragnar."

"Y-Yeah..."

"Hahahaha! Lucky fellow you are, Ragnar Lodbrok! Your bride isn't the kind of girl who'd kick up a fuss about your previous relationships!"

The skáld ceased his song and burst into laughter.

"..."

Ragnar remained silent, his gaze downcast. Aslaug wondered if he was sleepy.

"She matched my swordsmanship, and she didn't even flinch when I mentioned I used to be your wife. Brilliant! Bragi once told me that you planned to propose to someone, so I just had to see her for myself. Worth the trip, I'd say!"

Didn't flinch? Besides, she hadn't even accepted the proposal yet. Arguing seemed pointless, so she gnawed on the bone-in deer meat in silence.

"That composure of yours is something else. I can't tell if you're just extraordinarily forgiving, or if you're really a princess of some clan... maybe even Norse royalty!"

"Ah, yes. As I mentioned briefly earlier, she's the real deal."

"Huh?"

"Indeed," the skáld declared, strumming his instrument. "The lady here is none other than Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and Brynhildr the Valkyrie!"

"...Huh?"

The warrior woman's face drained of expression, as if a mask had fallen to the floor. The sudden transformation jolted Aslaug. She blinked twice, questioning her own perception. It was the same person, yet not the same woman she'd seen moments ago. The mask of the fierce warrior, a symbol of boldness, strength, and chivalry, had vanished. In its place was the wide-eyed wonder of a young girl captivated by a fairy tale or poem filled with gods and heroes.

"Was that..."

Was that a joke? Or the truth? Lagertha, the warrior woman, opened her lips to question the skáld, but in that very instant... all sound vanished.

Or perhaps, in a sudden burst of thunderous noise that far exceeded the limits of her eardrums, she'd lost her sense of hearing in a single breath.

Aslaug flung her eyes open, rising from the bench to peer outside.

White. No, light. A light, pulsing with such dense magical energy that it scorched the skin, engulfed the longhouse exterior.

"Ragnar!" she rasped, straining for sound.

The giant, who had been near-incoherent from ale, stood battle-ready, a heavy axe slung across his back. A focused glint in his eyes, a sheen of sweat on his temples—a rare sight, Aslaug mused. The man who'd stared down the troll with a steady gaze was now tense with unease at the unseen threat beyond the longhouse.

What of the warrior and the skáld? A muffled croak escaped her throat as she turned to check. Both of them... weren't moving. Lagertha, mid-sentence, held her questioning pose. The skáld too was frozen. Their faces were unresponsive to her touch or the pinch of her fingers. The wolf, curled up on the floor after its meal, also remained a statue.

"...I'll go check outside first."

"I'll go with you."

She strode beside the hulking figure, her mythril spear held tight.

Stepping outside, the world bled white, as if no other colours existed.
Understanding dawned. *Ah. Everything has stopped.*
At the forest's edge, a pillar of light pierced the sky. Lightning. A thunderbolt.
Everything came to a halt the moment it struck the ground.

O Thou who hast forsaken awe.

Not a sound, not a voice, yet the words echoed in her mind, the same as in the forest. The voice resounded while silencing everything. Aslaug couldn't even imagine it. All she could think of was that it was something beyond human reach, arcana and fantasy only achievable in the Age of Gods.

Limited spatiotemporal manipulation. Cessation of time. Or an illusion so supreme, it deceived all, sentient or not, within its grasp. Could such a feat be achieved through mastery of the Primordial Runes from the Scandinavian Age of Gods? Or by trading a right eye for all wisdom, like the Allfather who ruled over the Norse lands?

However, such a thing was unthinkable in the reality of ninth-century Scandinavia. But then... how else could this be explained?

I laud thy valour in seeking to wed my progeny, the demigod who beeth awe unto herself. Thus the hour draweth nigh for thee to learn of the awe of yore and prove thou mayest overcome it. Thou hast three trials in all. Having bested the first, thou shalt await the second.

A soundless sound, a voiceless voice. Yet an image of the speaker formed in their minds. Though unseen in the forest, a figure now stood before them. Aslaug felt its presence, and Ragnar met its gaze with a fierce glare.

Humanoid, yet not. Neither forest beast, nor tree shadow.

It was storm. It was conflict. It was sword. And it was death.

Suddenly, it shifted, appearing as an old one-eyed man wielding a gleaming spear. Its essence was awe. Its essence was the world. Its essence was ancient. Its essence was arcana.

A type of illusion, surely. It was impossible to tell what was real within their sight. Perhaps time flowed normally, the lightning a figment, and they merely slumbered before Lagertha and the skáld.

Yet, here they were, witnessing this... entity that tested them. A challenge to the warrior who dared seek marriage with its descendant.

"The Allfather, Odin?!" Ragnar boomed, the name echoing Aslaug's own realisation.



All who witnessed it would understand.

Ah, this must be the real thing.

The Allfather. The king of gods chronicled in sagas, the ruler of the nine Norse realms in the Age of Gods, and the object of faith for countless Scandinavians. Even if it were an illusion, it could be none other than the Allfather who had wrought it.

"Odin! If you truly stand before me, hear this!" Ragnar roared.

Defiance, not reverence, fueled his voice. A warrior's rebellion against the overwhelming presence!

Shaken but unbroken, the Viking warrior threw off the shackles of awe. Embracing Aslaug's shoulder, his gaze locked on the phantom. With a voice deep and powerful enough to rival thunder...

"By my axe, my pride, and my soul! My noble princess, Aslaug! I shall overcome all the trials and take you as my wife!"

Mm. Was that really the best response?

Another proposal when she wasn't ready? Again?

Surely even the Viking was tiring of this. Oh, well.

She had no clue if that was truly the Allfather, but the shock was undeniable. But it didn't matter. Trials meant nothing to her. She would let none dictate her way of being, and marriage was no different.

Still, a debt hung over her from the trial. She'd stick with him until it was repaid. Maybe the mythril tunic?

Besides, most of the time spent hunting the troll was wasted on tedious trap-making. She craved something more flashy for the next one. If this being wanted them to overcome something, it'd better pay attention to her too.

She hardened her resolve. Even if the Allfather stood in her way, she wouldn't back down without a fight!

"By my father and mother in the beyond. By the kind Old Man Heimir. Allfather or not, I swear you're going to regret this!"

Burning with a fighting spirit akin to an azure flame, she hurled her words of resolve at the Allfather, creator of all Valkyries.

[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Maintained / Ninth Century]

[Norway / Along the Frøyfjorden Coast]

On the same day, at the same time.

As thunder echoed, and the phantom of the Allfather descended from a distant higher realm, a life washed ashore on the nighttime coast. The waves of the Frøyfjorden Strait seemed to have coughed her up, a young woman with ashen hair.

Exhausted and naked, she lay collapsed, her body utterly limp. There was no doubt that the waves must have tossed her about for a long time. Her lips, cold and bloodless, were a pale blue, and her soul seemed on the verge of departing its vessel.

Perhaps, had a kind soul arrived with medicine, hot soup, and a blanket, the girl could have been saved. But on that desolate coast, under the cold night sky, her life ebbed away.

Then... the distant howling of a wolf pierced the silence. As if in response, a faint light bathed the girl's face. Moonlight and starlight streamed through a break in the clouds.

The next moment, her eyes fluttered open.

"...Uh, ah..."

Her azure eyes swam, and a trickle of seawater escaped her lips. Gasping, she fought to regulate her breathing, her fading life force flickering back into existence.

Trembling, she used the sword clutched in her hand to support herself as she struggled to her feet. Yes, a sword.

I will not die. I refuse. I must not.

I did not come here to perish.

Her knees buckled as she started walking, but she pushed forward, relentlessly. Initially, the sword served as a makeshift cane, but after a few steps, her stride steadied.

"Aslaug..."

The name, a harsh rasp escaped her parched throat. The clouds parted, revealing the full moon and a tapestry of stars. Bathed in this light, the ashen maiden stood tall. A stark figure, naked, she clutched a sword that seemed to be forged of fire itself. Her eyes blazed with a dark flame.

My sworn enemy, I will see you dead, by my own hand.

(To Be Continued)

Afterword

Sakurai Hikaru

When the aurora borealis dances across the sky, lost arcana emerge upon the earth. The last Valkyrie, a descendant of the Allfather's daughter, bearing the blood of her father who slew a dragon and gained its power. The last Einherjar, a man who chose to fight as a Berserker to fulfil his own desires. Two ravens sing of death, of love, and the end...

This work is a spin-off novel of the Type-Moon work 'Fate/stay night,' and in particular, it shares the same world as the Type-Moon spin-off novel 'Fate/Apocrypha' (written by Higashide Yuuichirou) and features the daughter of a major character from my own work 'Fate/Prototype: Fragments of Sky Silver' as one of the protagonists. For those who are familiar with the series, this novel takes place in a parallel world classified as a compiled event, which follows a similar history to 'Fate/stay night' until the mid-twentieth century, but has diverged into a different path by the twenty-first century. It's set about ten years after the events of 'Fate/Apocrypha' and tells the story of the daughter of Lancer and her son-in-law from 'Fragments of Sky Silver.'

There were many components that brought this story to life.

First, there is Norse mythology, which is the source of the protagonists Aslaug and Ragnar.

Second, there is my own work 'Fate/Prototype: Fragments of Sky Silver,' which depicts the fragmentary meeting and separation of Aslaug's parents, the Valkyrie Brynhildr and the hero Sigurd.

And third, there are the character designs of Aslaug and Ragnar by Miwa Shirow. The daughter of the legendary couple and her warrior-king companion, depicted by Miwa, who also designed Brynhildr and Sigurd in 'Fragments of Sky Silver,' were fresh, bright, and full of vitality, a new Nordic landscape in the Fate universe.

With his permission, I presented the designs to Nasu Kinoko and Takeuchi Takashi. Without hesitation, they surprised me with, "Please write their story." (I thought there might be a chance for the next generation of Nordic heroes to appear in one of the ongoing works, but I never expected to get an order to write a new series of novels!)

This is a story with two protagonists.

One is Aslaug, the protagonist of the ninth century. As mentioned above, her parents are the Valkyrie Brynhildr and the hero Sigurd of the Age of Gods. She has a fateful encounter with Ragnar, the warrior who is to be her future partner, but in the modern era, she has lost his memory.

The other is Ragnar Lodbrok, the protagonist of the modern era. He is the Viking warrior who proposed to Aslaug in the ninth century and appeared in the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War in Oslo in the twenty-first century. He claims to want to 'save' Aslaug, who has no memory of him.

What twist of fate will befall these two, destined to weave a legend sung in the sagas of ninth-century Scandinavia? Why does Aslaug, who was summoned as a Heroic Spirit, have no memory of Ragnar?

The details not divulged in this volume will be woven together in the sequels, alternating between the trials of the ninth century and the Doubles Grail War of the modern era. I hope you'll enjoy the story of the last Valkyrie and Einherjar.

A little bit about the mage Lemina Eltfromm. Inspired by the footsteps of her brilliant ancestors, including the founder Darnic, she leapt into the Doubles Grail War. She has the potential to be a protagonist, but at least in this volume, she has yet to begin her own story. What will she do and what will she choose after encountering many legendary heroes and clashing with seasoned mages? I hope you will also watch over the path that the young Lemina takes, in addition to the fate of Aslaug and Ragnar.

Now, on to the acknowledgments.

To Nasu Kinoko and Takeuchi Takashi: Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to weave a new story. I will do my utmost to meet your expectations.

To Miwa Shirow: My deepest thanks for bringing these characters to life with your dazzling designs, vibrant illustrations, and captivating visuals. Your willingness to collaborate on character details and gadgets was invaluable. This volume was especially enriched by the image comics you created after reading the magazine prologue and the early plot outline. I was able to incorporate the lines "I only get angry when my pride is at stake" and "What's that outfit supposed to be!" from that feedback. I am truly grateful for your contributions.

To Higashide Yuuichirou: Not only did you readily agree to let me set the story in the 'post-Great-War' world of 'Fate/Apocrypha,' but you also provided invaluable assistance with everything from supervising Caules' guest appearance to consulting on the history and setting of Lemina and the Yggdmillennia clan. I cannot thank you enough for your generosity and expertise.

To Sanda Makoto and Haganeya Jin: Thank you for always being there to lend a listening ear and offer advice.

To Miwa Kiyomune: Thank you for providing me with the Norse research materials I needed for this work.

To the entire Type-Moon team: I am deeply grateful for your immense contributions to this project.

And finally, to all of you who have enjoyed this tale, I extend my heartfelt gratitude.

Until the next story.

CLASS Archer

Master *Lemina Eltfromm*

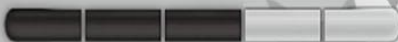
True Name *Aslaug*

Gender *Female*

Height *155cm* / *??kg*
Weight

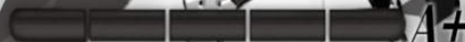
Alignment *Neutral Good*

Strength



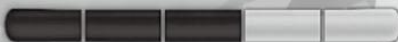
C

Mana



A+

Endurance



C

Luck



?

Agility



B

Noble Phantasm



A

Personal Skills

Divinity: B+

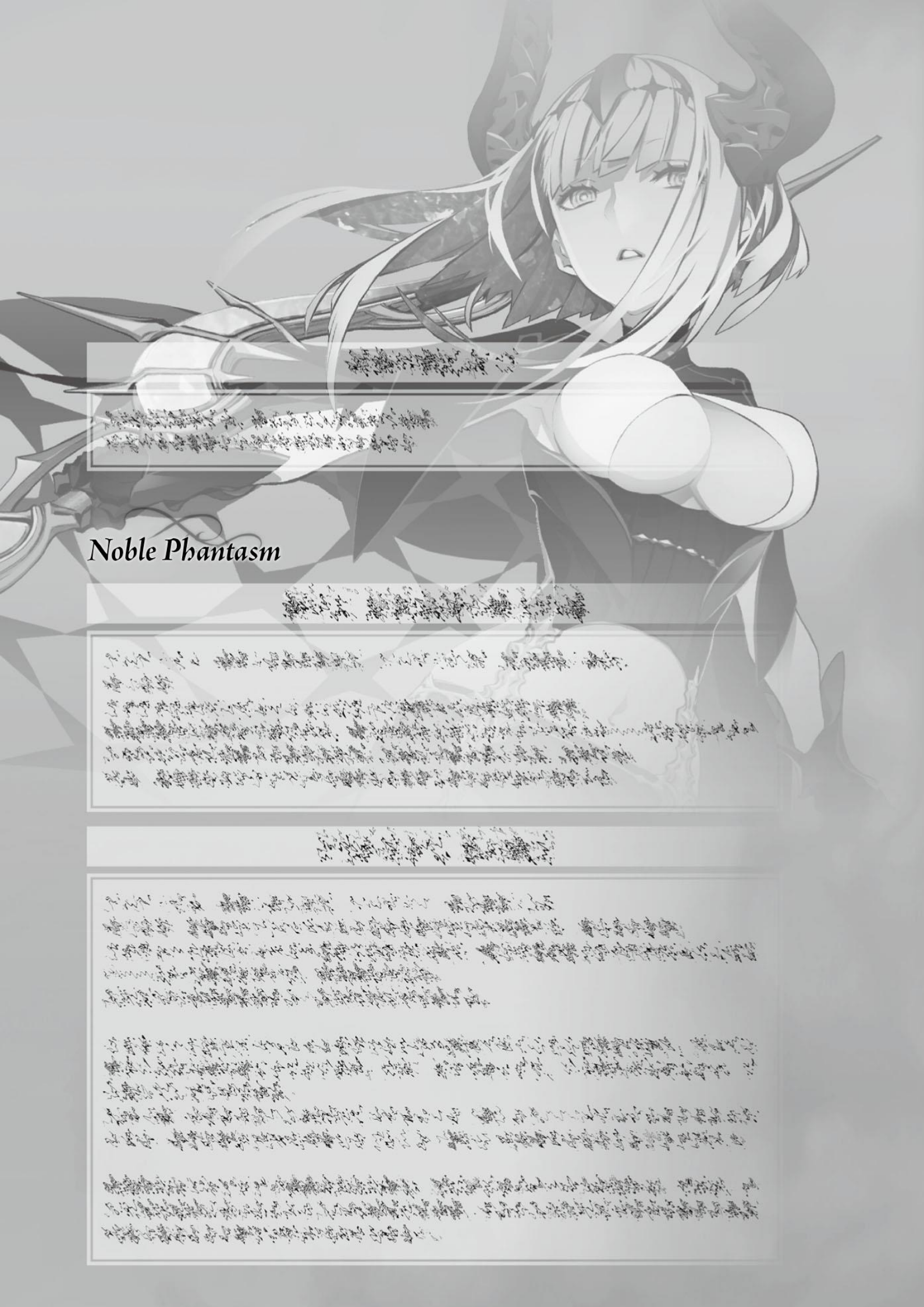
Possesses high Divine Spirit aptitude.

Innate Dragon: A

Innate combat abilities and magical energy inherited from her father.
Includes the Mana Burst skill. She can temporarily form an artificial magical energy reactor.

Guardian Wolf: C

The wolf that protects Aslaug, though she calls it a 'dog'.
Can be mounted despite her lack of a Riding skill.



Noble Phantasm

「 Noble Phantasm 是 一種 特殊 的 力量 形態 。

它 是 由 英靈 的 靈魂 所 凝 結 出 來 的 。

在 聖 杯 戰爭 中 。

英靈 會 使 用 這 種 力量 。

這 種 力量 的 強 弱 。

取 決 於 英靈 的 靈 力 。

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則 取 決 於 英靈 的 位 階 。

CLASS Berserker

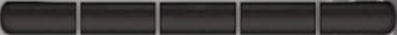
Master *Lemina Eltfromm*

True Name *Ragnar Lodbrok*

Gender *Male*

Height *210cm / 120kg*

Alignment *Neutral Good*


Strength  **A+**

Endurance  **B**

Agility  **B**

Mana  **C**

Luck  **?**

Noble Phantasm  **B**

Class Skills

Madness Enhancement: E~A++

This skill is linked to his Noble Phantasm.

When his Noble Phantasm is unreleased, mutual understanding through communication is possible, but the skill functions at rank E.

Independent Action: A

The capability to operate without a Master.

However, a Master is necessary when large amounts of magical energy is required, such as when using a Noble Phantasm.





Personal Skills

Viking Bravery: A

His combat experience and mentality as a Viking.
Includes the effects of the Bravery skill.

Kingly Vessel: B

A variant of Charisma. Also represents his fate to become a king.

Indomitable: B

Superhuman physical and mental durability.
When activating this skill, his endurance rank rises temporarily to A++.

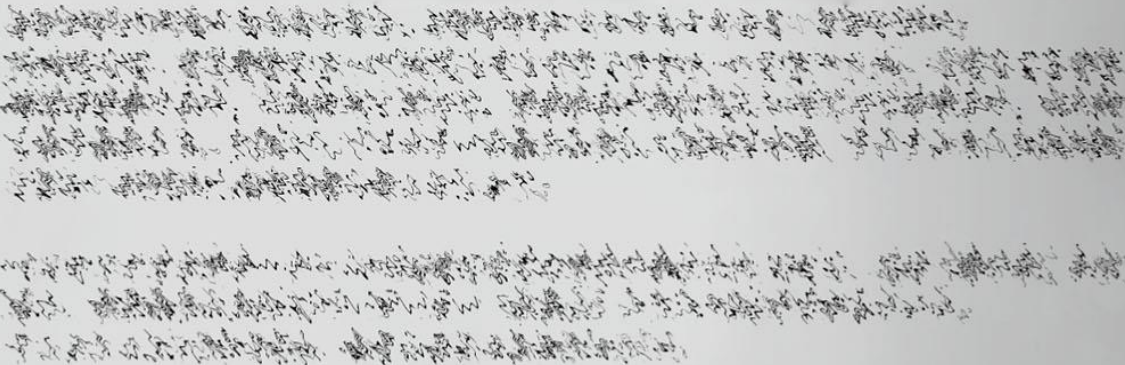


Noble Phantasm

Viðurr Berserk

Wrath of a Berserker

Rank: B+ Type: Anti-Unit (Self) Noble Phantasm Range: — Maximum Targets: 1 person



CLASS Rider

Master *Gagam Istorre*

True Name *Sinfjötli*

Gender *Male*

Height *230cm / 150kg*
Weight

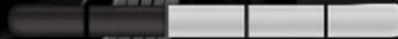
Alignment *Chaotic Good*

Strength  *B*

Endurance  *B*

Agility  *C*

Mana  *C*

Luck  *D*

Noble Phantasm  *B*

Class Skills

Riding: A+

The ability to operate a vessel that shouldn't exist, the ship of the underworld that is his Noble Phantasm.

Magic Resistance: B

Negates magecraft that has less than three verses in its incantation.
Does not take much damage even from greater magecraft or ritual curses.

Divinity: B

Possesses high Divine Spirit aptitude.





Personal Skills

Volsung's Merit: A

A mighty warrior with the blood of the Volsung clan running deep in his veins. In addition to the effects of the Bravery skill, the effects of the Monstrous Strength skill apply under exceptional circumstances.

Grotesque Warrior: C

A grotesque wolf-headed warrior with sharp claws and an overflowing beastly nature. Sinfjötli does not have this skill if manifested normally.

Battle Acceleration (Beast): B+

A skill transformed by the acquisition of the Grotesque Warrior skill.
A special technique for closing the gap between himself and a target.
Significantly reduces the movement penalty of ultra-high speeds.

Noble Phantasm

Fjord Drakkar From the Fjord to the Beyond

Rank: B Type: Anti-Unit Noble Phantasm Range: 2-99 Maximum Targets: 5 people

The Norse underworld ship.
Odin, the Allfather, bore the body of Sinfjötli, his blood-kin, across the fjords upon this vessel.
This underworld ship ferries souls between the realms of the dead and living, functioning as a potent Self-Destructive Noble Phantasm capable of dragging both him and his target from the mortal plane.
However, in his current manifestation, it serves as a formidable mobile weapon, leveraging its stealth and mobility with Lancer Percival as its 'main cannon.'
His Master forbade him from unleashing the ship's True Name, thereby preventing its self-destructive capabilities.

The ship itself resembles a traditional Viking vessel.
Light sails unfurl from the cross-shaped mast, governing its speed, while the lined shields adorning the hull function as magical energy thrusters.
When the ship is not in use, the mast can be used as a spear.

CLASS

Lancer

Master *Gagam Istorre*

True Name *Percival*

Gender *Male*

Height *195cm / 110kg*

Alignment *Lawful Good*

Strength  *B*

Endurance  *B*

Agility  *B*

Mana  *D*

Luck  *C*

Noble Phantasm  *B*

Class Skills

Magic Resistance: B++

Negates magecraft that has less than three verses in its incantation.
Does not take much damage even from greater magecraft or ritual curses.
Would normally be rank C, but his Noble Phantasm raises its rank.

Riding: C+

A master jousting and an excellent cavalryman.
It is said that he once fought evenly against Sir Lancelot on horseback.





Personal Skills

Blessings of the Holy Grail: A

Witnessing Galahad's ascension to Heaven forged a deep connection to the Holy Grail, granting him a certain blessing. Some legends and stories even hail Percival as a Grail bearer.

Guardian Knight (Holy Lance): B+

The noble knight who guards the Holy Lance.
Similar but not identical to the Guardian Knight skill.

Light of Salvation: B

Radiates a light imbued with both defensive and restorative effects.
A secondary effect of the Holy Lance, his Noble Phantasm, turned skill.

Noble Phantasm

Longinus Count Zero

Radiant Lance of Fate

Rank: C+~A+ Type: Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm Range: 1-70 Maximum Targets: 600 people

Another Holy Lance, said to have pierced the chest of the Saviour.
Upon True Name Release, Longinus manifests the transcendent might displayed by Sir Balin when he wielded it against King Pellam.
It functions as a literal Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm, capable of reducing the royal castle (believed to have been the Grail Castle, Corbenic) to rubble.
Despite its capability for fearsome destruction, it also exhibits the ability to greatly heal designated targets.

The Holy Lance is bound by dual restraints placed upon it by Galahad and Balin. These can be considered to be a downsized version of the Thirteen Restraints on the Holy Lance Rhongomyniad (or the Knight King's Holy Sword Excalibur of another world).

Leshy (Lešij)

Forest apparitions or spirits from Slavic folklore. Known for their diverse forms, they possess the ability to alter their size, shapeshift, and manipulate the wind. They enjoy pranks and sometimes abduct women and girls. Some legends claim they take the spirits of the deceased girls they ruin as wives. While ancient, higher-ranking entities may be revered as forest guardians and classified as elementals in the Clock Tower's taxonomy, the individual encountered in this story was of a lower or middle rank.

Summoned as a Caster spirit, it was granted a makeshift Saint Graph composed of shadows and was patrolling the perimeter when it encountered Berserker. Mistaking Berserker for a mere human, it was obliterated with a single swing of an axe. It should be noted that it did not lack the ability to sense magical energy. In fact, it was rather skilled in this regard...



THOUGH IT SOUNDS LIKE ITS
TREE BODY CREAKS AND
GROANS, IT LACKS
A MOUTH OR VOCAL
CORDS, RENDERING IT
INCAPABLE OF SPEECH.



Troll (Forest Troll)

A descendent of the fallen giant race, a type of nature spirit. After the Age of Gods, the giants - once phantasmal species with a genuine lineage - could no longer sustain themselves. They merged with fading nature spirits, smaller beings also losing their physical form, to survive through the Nordic era of human history.

Generally weak to sunlight, they burn up instantly under direct exposure. Scientific ultraviolet rays, devoid of the sun's blessing, don't cause them to combust, but they certainly are unwelcome. The 'Trial of the Forest' summoned by the Allfather Odin in this story is a troll that fused with a forest spirit for survival.

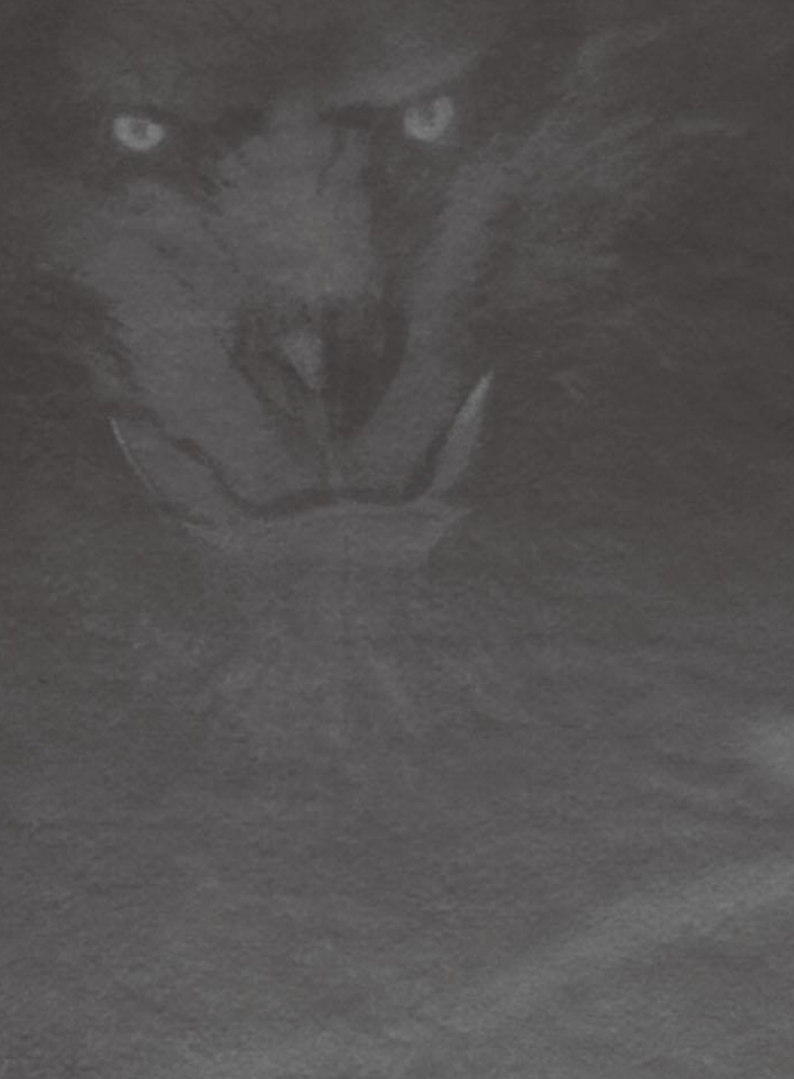
New individuals are exceedingly rare, and this specimen is estimated to be among the last generation of forest trolls, lingering from the 9th century.

The mushrooms and conifers blanketing the forest troll's body are not just symbols of its nature spirit essence, but also a protective adaptation to sunlight, allowing for limited activity even under the sun's rays. As forest trolls age, they become increasingly engulfed by this vegetation, eventually becoming immobile and merging with the forest itself.



FOREST TROLL





Ulfheðnar

Berserkers, the peerless warriors blessed by the Allfather Odin, were said to have worn bear pelts. Ulfheðnar (or Ulfheðinn), formidable warriors akin to Berserkers, were said to don wolf pelts and tore through their foes with beastly ferocity. Perhaps, in the Age of Gods, 'Ulfheðnar' referred to a non-human, supernatural werewolf or a monstrous warrior with the head of a wolf. However, various theories abound within the modern world of magecraft, leaving the truth shrouded in mystery. In this story, the Sinfjötli appearing in the 9th century is a wraith or Heroic Spirit possessing a wolf's body, granted by the Allfather Odin. Therefore, he wasn't strictly a true Ulfheðnar. Despite this, Ragnar, a mere human far removed from the Age of Gods, instantly recognized the wolf-headed warrior who aided him and Aslaug as one of those legendary figures.





The Doubles Grail War dances, the flames flicker, and the jester laughs.

Volume 2 Planned for a 2023 Release

Preview of Next Volume

Lady Merethul, a veteran champion of the Subspecies Holy Grail Wars, strides onto the scene at last, wielding the might of both Caster and Assassin. And under the command of the mage Maltheim, the greatest and strongest Saber finally makes his entrance.

Wolf's Portrait

Bonus
Story

by SAKURAI HIKARU



Illustration from Miwa Shirow's 'Romancia:Aurora'

Wolf's Portrait (Short Story from Type-Moon Ace 15)

"Do you know what a peace sign is?"

"Nah."

"Nope."

"Woof."

"Like this, two fingers up. Not straight, but a V... Like an upside-down Uruz rune. Yep, that's right."

"Hold still. I'm going to take a picture now. Three, two, one, cheese!"

The red cellphone emitted an artificial shutter sound composed of electronic beeps. Three tries, and finally, a decent selfie.

The eight-megapixel image captured three figures and one animal. More precisely, one human, two Servants, and one animal. The photographer, Lemina Eltfromm. The hulking Berserker, towering at nearly two metres. The silent silver Archer, ever at ease. And a large wolf, standing proudly in the street.

A wolf. Yes, a wolf. Not a dog. A full-fledged wild beast, a stark contrast to the nighttime cityscape of Karl Johans Gate.

201X AD, Norway's Capital, Oslo. Bjørvika.

It happened abruptly. The wolf materialised out of nowhere. It was the first night of the Doubles Subspecies Holy Grail War. Just minutes after the chance encounter with the Istorre siblings, Lancer's Masters, on their way back from dinner during the intermission.

Lemina glanced at her companions—the legendary Viking king and queen, two of Scandinavia's most renowned Heroic Spirits. As she contemplated how adorable the silver maiden looked nibbling on waffles, pondering a proper photo opportunity, something bizarre unfolded.

The girl's shadow at the edge of Lemina's vision began to rise subtly. In less than two seconds, the shadow transformed into a massive quadruped over 160 centimetres long.

Huh? A puppy? No, not a dog.

There had been no prior sign. Yet, the wolf stood undeniably real, a stark presence. Its sheer aura defied all logic, scorching the skin and preventing it from blending naturally into the shadows. It brought images of the Black Dogs and Barghests from British folklore to Lemina's mind, though their true forms remained a mystery to her.

What was her first move? As a mere mage who couldn't measure up to the extraordinary feats of a Heroic Spirit, her actions needed to be instinctive. Lemina naturally went into a defensive stance. Defence, in this situation, meant an offensive action to protect herself and her companions. Violating the intermission's non-combat rule meant immediate disqualification.

But the situation was unclear. Did someone break the ceasefire and launch an attack? Or did one of the Servants go berserk? Lemina couldn't risk her precious Servants getting bitten!

She instantly focused her mind on activating one of the multiple combat Mystic Codes concealed beneath her clothes. A testament to her daily training, she accomplished this before shock and fear overwhelmed her. In a corner of her mind, she even considered giving herself a pat on the back later. However, in this instance, that mental leeway meant a fatal delay.

As a result, Lemina was a hair's breadth too slow. Before the spare Mystic Code could unleash offensive magecraft and trigger a freezing effect via an elemental conversion spell, the silver maiden reacted smoothly.

As if noticing something suddenly, she turned her azure eyes behind her and spoke, "Ah, dog."

She immediately embraced the wolf, her arms wide open, surrendering herself completely.

Both her and the hulking man had let their guards down completely. He calmly observed the entire scene, from the wolf's arrival to the girl's embrace. No hint of surprise, or so it seemed. He didn't even budge.

Aha, I see. Both of them know this wolf.

The silver girl, her expression unchanged, continued to stroke the wolf's head and back with her right hand before Lemina's eyes. The wolf showed no signs of displeasure. At first glance, it was a heartwarming scene—an arcane maiden cherishing her obedient beast. If not for the perception-interference spell on the girl, nine out of ten Oslo citizens passing by would have smiled at the touching interaction.

A closer look revealed the girl's focus had already shifted back to the half-eaten waffle in her left hand.

"Good boy."

"Woof!"

The wolf's sharp bark pierced the Oslo night. Lemina worried it might startle some passersby. While the wolf resembled a large dog at first glance, anyone familiar with real wolves would recognize the difference.

A crowd-dispersal spell crossed her mind, but then she realised—it was unnecessary. Neither the sound nor the sight seemed to register with the people, much like the girl under the spell.

"Archer, do you know him?"

"Yep, he's my dog."

"Dog?"

It sure didn't look like a dog. It was a wolf.

"Yep, dog."

"I see."

Lemina held herself back from commenting on the girl's limited vocabulary. Perhaps the incomplete language blessing of the Holy Grail was to blame.

Nodding vaguely, Lemina studied the wolf. Beyond the spell, she noticed details she'd missed before. The magical energy emanating from the wolf felt very similar to Archer's. Focusing her awareness, she faintly sensed a connection: her to the girl, then the girl to the wolf.

A familiar, perhaps? Or a constantly-active Noble Phantasm that didn't require a True Name release?

Noble Phantasms. The essence of a Heroic Spirit, the embodiment of their legend. Prior Subspecies Holy Grail Wars documented the existence of these enigmatic artefacts—shrouded in mystery, unknown not just to the public but even most mages. A vast majority, however, were arcana of legend that endured through the ages.

Lost in thought, Lemina looked up at Ragnar, meeting his tall gaze.

"As far as I know," she said, "I haven't heard any tales of a wolf that could be her Noble Phantasm..."

"That's my princess' wolf. No mistake."

"I see."

An unknown legend or arcanum from her lifetime, perhaps? That was fine too. An obscure Noble Phantasm would make formulating countermeasures difficult, even if its True Name were revealed.

"Let me confirm one thing," Lemina pressed. "That wolf is your Noble Phantasm, correct?"

"Noble Phantasm..."

The silver maiden tilted her head, moving away from the wolf. The wolf mirrored her movement in a display of canine empathy. Confusion clouded its features.

"Hmm. I see." Lemina nodded firmly. "Then that settles it. I almost got a bit too excited thinking I had another ace up my sleeve, but we probably shouldn't count on that. We'll proceed with our current strategy. We can talk more about the wolf during the next intermission. Agreed?"

"Yeah," the Viking warrior nodded.

"Yep," the Valkyrie maiden nodded.

"Woof!" the wolf huffed.

"Good."

Lemina sighed, briefly closing her eyes for two seconds before opening them.

"In that case, why don't we capture this moment with a commemorative photo?"

†

[Observation Target / Shift]

[Compilation Continuum Upstream / Recreating Observation / Ninth Century]

[Norway /]

The Valkyries who danced in the skies,
The Dvergar who forged weapons for the gods,
And the very gods and giants themselves vanished.
The battles between dragons and heroes became mere legends of a distant past.
The eternal flame that flickered atop Mt. Hindarfjall was extinguished, and the once-nine realms of the Nordic world were reduced to the single land of Miðgarðr. The World Tree Yggdrasil, once so vast it seemed to cover the heavens, was no more.
The Age of Gods had ended, and the Age of Man had begun.
Human warriors crossed the seas, seeking to plunder and raid...

{Don't fret, old man. Everything's fine. That wasn't a mistake. I just unravelled a sliver of the thread of time weaving the tale of the Valkyrie and the Viking. A snippet of an unseen fragment woven into the tapestry. Besides, it's your fault for sending her the wolf without any explanation!}

Quietness/Silence/Void.

{What's wrong? Ouroboros?}

Void/Silence/Quietness.

{Hey, cut it out! You can't just start distributing the strings unevenly because you're inconvenienced! You know weaving requires precision.}

†

Three more. Three more heartbeats, and I'll be dead.

The girl's thoughts swam in a haze.

A monstrous roar echoed before her. A colossal carnivore stood its ground, casting an all-encompassing shadow that spoke of inevitable demise. Size and environment—both were stacked against her.

It was only natural. The opponent was a bear, one of the most fearsome creatures to roam the Norse lands of the Common Era. The girl was at a crippling disadvantage on all fronts. To make matters worse, it was a brown bear, perfectly suited to the dense forest around them.

Ten paces separated them, a precarious distance.

One heartbeat, and the bear would be upon her.

Two, and its claws would lash out.

Three, and it would all be over.

The girl recoiled from the thought of death. The fear gripped her. Not just the pain, but the finality of it all filled her with dread. She hadn't even achieved anything yet. While she lacked any goals, the thought of simply vanishing without a trace was unbearable.

A flicker of defiance sparked within her. Yet, her body felt strangely heavy, refusing to obey. She'd never faced a bear, but she'd waltzed around packs of snarling wild dogs, humming a carefree tune, until they all foamed at the mouth and collapsed.

If only her body responded to her, escaping from even the strongest predator wouldn't be out of the question. Unfortunately for her, she remained oblivious to the fact that her mind was holding her body captive.

The girl's inherent nature granted her formidable strength. Her slender limbs, woven with flesh and blood of the Age of Gods, could effortlessly overpower a grown man. Wielding her mother's heirloom, a weapon of mythril, her combat prowess soared.

However, on this day, the girl was both unarmed and severely debilitated. The concept of life and death remained a foreign notion; she'd neither witnessed it nor received instruction. Sadly, her father's survival instincts, still dormant, offered no solace in the face of this lethal struggle in the northern lands.

The ninth century held no expectation of peak physical condition. A true warrior's honour was forged in the crucible of battle—fighting through wounds, inflicting them in turn, tasting the blood of both foe and self, dragging blood-caked limbs through mud, and still crushing the enemy's skull to claim victory. The girl, however, remained uninitiated in the Viking warrior's grim reality—the battlefield, a realm of death.

This explained her sluggish reaction, two heart beats too slow. On this day, she cursed her powerlessness to her very core. A profound loneliness, akin to being stranded in a midwinter blizzard, gnawed at her. It was an emptiness like grasping at frigid snow, a crushing weight of guilt with no target for apology. It rendered the girl numb, her perception of reality fading. The reason was simple.

One she cherished had perished this very morning.

For millennia, since the twilight of the Age of Gods, Old Man Heimir had watched over the slumbering girl within the great mythrill harp. After she awakened in ninth-century Norway, he had raised her as his own. Kind, gentle, and unfailingly generous, he answered her every query, recounted the legends of her parents, and always provided her with steaming bowls of soup.

But this morning, he lay cold and still in his bedchamber, his eyes forever shut. No amount of shaking could rouse him. Even beneath a thick blanket, his body remained icy.

Desperate, she tried the Age of Gods runes her mother had used, channelling her own blood as Heimir had instructed. Neither the healing runes nor the sickness-curing runes had any effect, and even the forbidden runes yielded no response.

The night before, the innkeeper and his wife had coldly informed her, "The old man paid us in gold and silver last night, asking us to take you in. Not like you have anyone else to turn to, anyway."

She could only nod in confusion, her mind refusing to comprehend their words. Before she realised it, she had left the inn and wandered into the forest. Oblivious to the lurking dangers, she stood lost in thought, wondering who could guide her through the unknown that stretched before her. Then...

Crash!

The sound of rustling leaves broke the silence.

In that instant, she whirled around to see a bear lumbering to its feet.

Three more. Three more heartbeats, and she'd be dead.

One heartbeat, and the bear was upon her.

Two, and its claws lashed out.

Ah, it's over... Is this the end for me?

"Awooooooooooo!"

No. Not yet.

A deafening roar shattered the silence, blood splattering the air. A shadow, swifter than any arrow, darted forward and ripped a deep gash across the bear's face. Not a blade, not a projectile, but a sharp claw tore through the thick fur and flesh of the formidable beast. It streaked past in a blur of dark silver fur, its eyes the same azure as the girl's.

Just two heartbeats ago, there was no sign of the four-legged beast. Now, it stood as if materialised from the ground beneath her feet.

"Awoo!"

"...!"

The beast's cry jolted her from the daze.

The situation was clear. Enemy. Bear. A ferocious carnivore. It had shifted from a two-legged stance to a threatening four-legged one. The wound wasn't fatal, but the bear cowered, surprised by the four-legged attacker.

An opening! With azure eyes locked on the enemy, she understood. She steeled herself, swallowing her own discomfort. Now was the time to act.

She dodged the attack with a dancer's grace, launching herself high into the air. Suspended in the safe zone beyond the bear's reach, she calmed herself and traced runes in the empty air. The Primordial Rune took a moment to activate, but once it did, it took less than three heartbeats for the arcane fire to engulf the bear.

No roar escaped its burning form. Flames licked at its open mouth, searing its lungs. It trashed wildly, claws tearing at the forest trees, but its struggle was short-lived. The flames scorched its fur, charred its flesh, and claimed its life. The bear collapsed with a thud.

"I'm sorry. This only happened because I trespassed into the forest."

She resolved to eat the heart and left paw before leaving, at the very least. Consuming beasts she killed would allow them to live on as her own flesh and blood. That was one of the lessons Old Man Heimir had left her with.

Is it a dog? Or a wolf?

Tilting her head, the girl approached the four-legged beast. It showed no sign of running away even as she drew closer. A strange beast indeed. It didn't flinch at the flames conjured by the runes, nor did it shy away from the charred bear's scent. Instead, it whined softly and nuzzled her feet. Most peculiar.

"Um..."

What did Old Man Heimir say again?

Wolves, she recalled, were dangerous forest creatures. Dogs, on the other hand, had been companions to humans since ancient times. That was the memory that stirred within her.

The beast's immediate attachment, blossoming without any feeding, suggested it might be a dog. With that thought in mind, the girl reached out and stroked its throat.

"Good boy."

"Arf."

It didn't seem to mind being petted.

"Hm?"

A dog, she thought, would be happy with human contact... yet this one seemed strangely indifferent. It stood with its forepaws together, a posture exuding a quiet dignity, like a proud warrior at rest.

Unsure, the girl decided to delve deeper into Old Man Heimir's teachings. Closing her eyes, she sought answers in the past.

Dogs. They are friends of humanity.

Unlike wolves. They are not friends of humanity.

They dwell in the forest's shadowed depths, fearsome creatures that often roam in packs. These packs are formidable—a cause of caution.

But beware... the truly terrifying wolves are those that hunt alone.

Fear the lone wolves with their gleaming coats.

And above all, fear and revere the wolves of golden fur, for they are the rulers of the forest. Never belittle, deceive, or take from them. Know that the gleaming golden wolves are an ancient arcane race, embodying a power beyond human reach. Perhaps they are the Garmr or the original Ulfheðnar of a bygone age when gods walked the earth. The truth remains shrouded in mystery.

Your uncle Sinfjotli serves as a grim reminder. He once stole golden wolf fur from a cursed noble, and donned it, transforming into a monstrosity wreaking havoc akin to the Ulfheðnar of legend. He had forgotten his fear and reverence of the golden wolves, and for that, he ended with the blood of many on his fangs. Though your uncle boasted the blood of the Allfather, no amount of absolution would grant his transgression the

right to go unpunished. By no miracle will Sinfjötli, the ancient champion, ever reclaim his true human form...

Humans must never belittle the arcane.

You are arcane in essence, but that is all the more the reason to respect it.

This is not only about wolves.

Respect the trolls, ruined giants.

Revere the Murkrake, the might of the ocean.

They are the breath of the forest, of the sea, and of nature itself. They lie forever beyond human reach. You must respect, fear, and revere them. Never belittle them...

"I don't really remember, but I think Heimir said something about wolves being golden."

"Woof."

"You're not golden," she said, crouching slightly to meet its gaze.

"Arf."

The silver maiden stared intently at the four-legged beast.

"A dog?"

"Arf."

A bark with a hint of intent returned.

Affirmation? Denial?

"Yep, not golden."

"Arf," the beast echoed, a short, decisive sound.

Their eyes locked, both pairs of azure orbs reflecting the other's gaze.

A moment of silence passed. One, two—a full three heartbeats' worth of time—and the girl opened her lips, her voice soft and solemn.

"...I understand."

Breaking their locked gazes, she lowered her eyes. The light glinted off her long lashes, casting an ethereal glow on the forest clearing. It was an echo of lost reverence, like that of a lost Age of Gods ritual.

"Yep," she nodded slightly, meeting his gaze once more.

A strong conviction flickered in her eyes. Speaking from feeling instead of thought, her words flowed freely.

Four-legged beast, silver beast who arrived from a place unknown. You are...

"A dog!"

"Arf!"

No! is what he would have exclaimed if he could speak the tongue of man. *I am no dog. Absolutely not.* His physical form was obviously one of a wolf, but that was a trivial detail for the beast, who could only let out a snort.

†

The beast's eyes spoke volumes.

I care not for what you see me as. Last Valkyrie, all that matters is you. An arcane miracle that transcends time, a testament to a love that once was. As long as your soul graces the earth, across any gulf of time, my claws and fangs will be by your side.

(Released after Volume 1 of Fate: Lost Einherjar)